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# LOVE IN IDLENESS

THE STORY OF A WINTER IN FLORIDA

BY

IZA DUFFUS HARDY

AUTHOR OF 'HEARTS OR DIAMONDS?' 'THE LOVE THAT HE PASSED BY'  
'ORANGES AND ALLIGATORS' ETC.

'Yet marked I where the bolt of Cupid fell :  
It fell upon a little western flower,—  
Before milk-white, now purple with Love's wound—  
And maidens call it Love-in-Idleness !'

*A Midsummer Night's Dream*

IN THREE VOLUMES

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# LOVE IN IDLENESS.

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## CHAPTER XXIII.

‘THERE WAS SOMETHING THE SEASON WANTED.’

It is often now decided to be too warm for driving, in the dust and heat of the day, when the loose deep sand lies bleaching and burning in the sun, and wheels and hoofs toss it up in blinding clouds, and the welcome breeze—if there is any—helps to blow it into the drivers’ eyes, to pepper and powder their faces. But it is never too warm for rowing—at least not for Rosemary and Violet, who repose as comfortably as may be in bow or stern while



their escorts—usually Staples and Tregelva—pull at the oars.

Sometimes the quartette divide into pairs ; and on these occasions at least one out of the four is all the happier for the division, as Staples has not learnt to relish the position of target for the shafts of Rosemary's satire, and she still inclines to make him her butt when she is in the mood for teasing. One day these four start on an expedition up Connor's Creek—a long, winding, narrow stream which connects the great Lake Rosalie with a neighbouring lake. The passage of this creek, being a matter of some difficulty, is not often made.

The first difficulty is to find and get into it at all, its mouth being so narrow that, when they shove their boat in, it seems as if they were running ashore right into the heart of the hammock. But as the little boat pushes in, it seems that a way opens before them into



the woods—a channel which sometimes widens into a broad pool, sometimes narrows till there is barely room for the boat to glide between the banks.

The second difficulty is the current, which flows against them and strives to bear them back; the third is the struggle with the low-growing branches and briars which reach and interlace across the stream. But, in spite of all obstacles, the enterprising little party push on, Staples and Tregelva putting all their energies into vigorous punting against the current, as the stream runs too strongly, and is too tortuous, narrow, and shallow, to admit of rowing.

Through the thickets of cypress and oak and cedar, palmetto and gum-tree and pine, the dense jungle, which seems to grow ever thicker and wilder as they advance, they fight their way up the winding creek, which curls



and twists in and out through the woods, and seems to tie itself into knots for the mere pleasure of straightening itself out again. Blossoming vines trail from tree to tree and tangle all together in one luxuriant wilderness. Here and there on the stately magnolia-trees the great white buds are swelling, and almost ready to burst into bloom. Tall purple flags and curious flowering rushes fringe the level banks; every turn and twist of the creek reveals new beauties in the varying tones and semitones, the whole chromatic scale of green—tender bud and last year's leaf; the fresh and delicate hues of the sapling pines, contrasting with the darker, richer hues of their elder forest brethren; the flecks and shafts of golden light glancing among the gleaming leaves; the deep inlets of shadow in the recesses of the hammock; while on the silvery white cypresses and the gnarled boughs of the evergreen oak



the grey Spanish moss hangs in abundant wintry-looking wreaths.

But our quartette have little leisure for appreciation of the beautiful during their battle with the overhanging branches, which threaten not only their head-gear but their heads ; the vines, which reach out and strive to entangle them in a too-affectionate embrace ; the aggressive briars, which grow—apparently of malice prepense—just at the right height to scratch their faces, as they push on between the wooded banks, which every now and then appear to close on them and shut them in, till the vigorous stroke of the pole sends the boat shooting round a sharp angle into a fresh curve of the narrow tortuous stream.

The young men, engrossed in their double struggle with the low-growing boughs and the swift strong current, have but little breath to expend in speech. What little they have they



think fit to devote to invocations of Jove; while the girls are fully occupied in shielding their faces from the briars.

Rosemary, always apt of quotation, breaks out in a snatch of song, being a slightly altered version of the 'Dismal Swamp'—

' Away to the Dismal Swamp we speed,  
Our path is rugged and sore;  
Thro' tangled juniper, beds of weeds,  
Thro' many a fen where the 'gator feeds,  
And boat never poled before.'

' And, by George, I don't think we'll ever pole it again!' exclaims Tregelva as a branch knocks his hat off into the stream. He makes a lunge at it with an oar, and nearly over-balances himself, recovering his equilibrium with an ignominiously ungraceful struggle, which all but capsizes the boat. Staples, taking warning by his friend's mishap, crushes his hat firmly down over his nose, but does not thereby escape his own turn of humilia-



tion ; for before many minutes have passed, just as he gives the boat a violent impetus with his propelling pole, a large strong branch takes him unawares, and lays him prostrate and grovelling in the bottom of the boat.

‘Oh what a fall was there!’ exclaims Rosemary, rather maliciously amused than sympathetic ; but the quotation ends in a little shriek, as her hat is torn off and left suspended on a briar, which clings to it so tenaciously that the hat is only rescued with the loss of a ribbon, left fluttering behind it on the branch.

Violet takes off *her* hat and bestows it carefully in the bottom of the boat.

‘It would be well if we could put our *heads* there,’ says Rosemary ruefully, lifting up her hands to her tumbled locks. ‘You’ll be scalped, Vi, without your hat.’

‘This will keep my hair on,’ Violet replies,



taking out a handkerchief and tying it round her head.

‘Would it come off?’ Staples inquires with sincere interest.

‘Of course it would!’ says Rosemary. ‘Don’t you know it’s only put on with pins?’

‘You will soon have ocular demonstration of the fact,’ laughs Violet, ‘for my hairpins are all coming out!’

And, indeed, the thorny boughs have effected havoc in the ordinarily sleek coils of her smooth dark hair.

Presently, much to their relief, the creek broadens, and thus gives them a little rest and breathing-time, as they can keep the middle of the channel and steer clear of the obnoxious briars. The stream, serpentining still, opens out in cool calm inlets all carpeted with lilies, then becomes a chain of pools winding a shin-



ing way through the close rich shadows of the wilderness of hammock and swamp.

These pools are like water-gardens, with royal purple flags growing out in the shallows, and yellow lilies floating like cups of gold amongst their broad, flat, plate-like leaves, while here and there patches of white water-lilies unfold their snowy blossoms wide.

Rosemary leans over the side and stretches out her hand to pull the lilies from their tough, smooth, snake-like stems, and pushes back her sleeve as the fresh cool ripples run and splash up her wrist.

Her hands are sunburnt, for even gloves by day and cold cream by night fail to entirely protect them from the tropical sun. They are not disfigured, only a trifle mellowed and deepened in tint, like the hands of a brunette instead of a blonde.

But the brunette hue stops like a bracelet



at the wrist: the fair arm above is unsunned white—warm white against the cold pure snow of the lilies she holds.

Tregelva's eye notes the beauty of that rounded arm as the gleaming drops fallen from the lilies run over its polished ivory.

Violet plucks one lily and then relents.

‘They look so lovely growing,’ she says, ‘it seems a shame to pick them; it would spoil the creek if all the lilies were plucked.’

‘We can indulge ourselves with a few without any danger of spoiling the creek for the next-comers,’ observes Rosemary, reaching for another flower.

A bittern, long-necked and long-beaked, sits on a branch, looks down unalarmed and curious as the boat approaches.

‘I’m glad Chadwick isn’t with us,’ remarks Staples. ‘He’d never be happy till he’d shot every bird! He wants to kill a whip-poor-will!’



‘Worse than that, he says he is going to shoot a mocking-bird,’ adds Tregelva.

‘Too bad!’ exclaims Violet warmly. ‘It ought to be forbidden by the law. There’s a rice-bird! What a beauty!’ she says admiringly as it sways near her on a branch and the sun catches the fire-red gleams beneath its fluttering wings.

‘Pretty thing! I should like to have it in a cage for a pet.’

‘I call that as cruel as killing it,’ said Rosemary.

‘Why?’ inquired Staples, resenting this aspersion on Violet. ‘She’d feed it and be kind to it.’

‘And do you think you’d be happy in a cage if she fed you and were kind to you?’ retorted Rosemary.

‘I shouldn’t like the cage, [but I should like the feeding well enough.’



‘What a gourmand!’ observes Violet, looking up at him with a lovely friendly smile.

‘If you don’t look out we shall be into those bushes,’ interposes Tregelva.

A little further on they come to a great tree which has fallen across the creek in such a way as to offer the most formidable obstacle that has beset their passage yet. The huge trunk lies like a bridge straight across the stream, about a foot or so above the surface—too low for them to pass under it, while too high for any skiff larger than a child’s toy to be hauled over it. The little party look at each other discomfited, but not hopeless, as they ask each other what is to be done? Are they to give up their intent of penetrating to the very end of Connor’s Creek and reaching the lake out of which it flows? Perish the thought!

Rosemary expresses only the general feeling when she exclaims:



‘We won’t give in! Over it, or under it, or round it, we’ve got to get, *somehow*!’

‘Could we drag the boat ashore and haul it round the end of the tree?’ suggests Violet.

‘Can’t do that,’ replies Tregelva. ‘There’s no solid land to give us foothold anywhere here: it’s all morass and swamp. But see here: I think if we were all to get out and sit on the trunk we might manage to push the boat well down in the water and shove it under somehow!’

This plan meets with general approval. Tregelva, standing up in the bow of the boat, holds it firmly against the fallen tree with one hand, while with the other he assists first Rosemary, and then Violet, to get out and seat themselves upon this rustic natural bridge.

Next, he himself follows; and then it is the turn of Staples, who has the most difficult



task to achieve, as he has to hold the boat as well as to climb on to the trunk, which lies as straight and level across the creek as if it had been placed there of intent as a bridge. Staples is not remarkable for skill and grace in gymnastic feats ; and, while scrambling in a plantigrade manner on to the trunk, ‘one foot on tree and one in boat!’ he gives an unlucky kick with the foot that rests on the edge of the boat. The boat slips from his foot, and in a moment, before he can catch at it, it is a yard away, and goes serenely drifting on the current farther and farther from the bridge, whereon the dismayed party are seated in a row, with their feet dangling above the stream.

‘Oh, Mr. Staples! how *could* you let it slip?’ exclaims Rosemary in indignant reproach.

‘There is a go!’ observes Tregelva, more



lazily amused than dismayed, and unable to help chuckling softly at his friend’s discomfiture.

‘What *are* we going to do now?’ asks Violet.

‘We certainly can’t sit here all day,’ remarks Tregelva.

‘Like four love-birds, all of a row, on our perch,’ says Rosemary.

‘You needn’t waste your anxiety,’ replies Staples, looking as sulky as is his wont when annoyed. ‘If I let the boat go I can get it back,’ and he begins deliberately to divest himself of his boots and his light summer coat, observing that ‘it’s too deep for wading here.’

‘Yes, my dear boy; I’m afraid the only thing to be done is to swim after it,’ says Tregelva blandly. ‘Think you can manage it by yourself?’



‘Can you really get it?’ asks Violet anxiously.

‘Easily enough,’ he replies, a shade more amiably. ‘I’ll bring it back all right.’

‘Don’t jump in with a flop, *please*!’ entreats Rosemary. ‘Let yourself down gently, so as not to splash us!’

Mr. Staples obliges her, and lowers himself into the creek as gently as possible, and begins to swim after the boat, which is gracefully and swiftly gliding down stream a-head of him.

‘All right, Leander!’ Tregelva called out after him encouragingly. ‘No alligators here!’

‘Will he be able to catch it?’ said Violet.

‘He’ll get it at the corner,’ Tregelva replied, indicating a curve a little way down the creek. ‘Those bushes will check its wild career.’

‘There may not be alligators,’ exclaimed Rosemary, suddenly lifting the hand which she had been leaning on the trunk. ‘But there



are worse! Why, this tree’s a *nest* of stinging ants! Look at them!’

‘Worse for us,’ said Violet; ‘but I think Mr. Staples would rather it was ants than alligators.’

Nevertheless Violet surveyed the portion of the tree on which she was seated with, first, suspicion, and then dismay, as she perceived the army of lively ants in full movement.

‘Lucky they’re not hornets!’ remarked Tregelva; ‘if they were, *we* should have to swim for it too. Bravo, old boy!’ he added as Staples came up with the boat, which was swaying gently on the little eddies at the curve of the stream, where the bushes had intercepted its course. Staples waded into the shallow water that he might more easily clamber over the side, and then began to pull the boat back to the waiting trio of love-birds on their trunk. He looked a forlorn figure in



his wet, dripping garments, and the girls both smiled—the one sympathetically and compassionately, the other coolly and amused—as he stood up dismal and drenched, and brought the boat to its moorage.

‘Let us get away from these horrid ants,’ exclaimed Rosemary petulantly, preparing to step down into the boat.

‘Please hold it steady!’

‘I suppose this puts a stopper on our getting up to the next lake?’ observed Tregelva doubtfully.

‘Certainly,’ Violet answered eagerly; ‘the sooner Mr. Staples gets into dry clothes the better! He will have to be in his wet things long enough, and too long, in the getting home.’

‘Never mind about me,’ said Staples. ‘A half hour or so more or less won’t matter a bit to me. My things ’ll dry in the sun.’



‘No, no,’ said Violet. ‘You’ll be getting malaria, or chills, or something!’

Violet’s opposition to the pursuit of their enterprise to its end carried the day, although Rosemary cast a longing glance up the unpenetrating windings of the creek, which meandered its way out of sight, curled like a gleaming chain round a bold curve, and was lost in the wilderness of hammock and swamp, wherein, if it would be too much to aver that ‘man never trod before,’ yet, certainly, man at least had left no sign nor token of his presence in the pathless morass and tangled thicket.

I am afraid that Mr. Staples did not much enjoy the homeward row, in spite of Violet’s kind looks of sympathy and friendly words. To take frequent turns at the by no means light work of punting a heavy-laden boat down a difficult and well-nigh unnavigable



stream, in which you have just been disporting yourself fish-like, with soaked and sticky garments in process of being dried on you by the sun, and seeming to turn to glue as they dry, is not one of life's most agreeable experiences ; nor is the consciousness of being presented in an awkward and unbecoming aspect to the eyes of the lady you most admire at all calculated to improve the situation.

Staples had fortunately his dry coat and boots ready, on landing, for the walk home ; but even so, it was a longer walk than he relished, for Lake Rosalie was the furthest of the five neighbouring lakes from West Grove House. Violet, who hated walking in the sun at all, unselfishly walked on at her quickest pace with him, whilst the other pair followed at their leisure.

‘ Miss Preston seemed very kindly anxious lest Staples should catch cold,’ observed Tre-



gelva, looking at the foremost couple hurrying on ahead.

‘Violet always is anxious lest anything uncomfortable should happen to anybody.’

‘You two appreciate each other,’ he rejoined. ‘I never saw two girls so fond of each other before! I like to see it—although—it——’

‘Although it what?’

‘It sometimes makes a fellow feel rather like—what’s his name?’ replied Tregelva lucidly.

‘Ah, what *is* his name?’ laughed Rosemary.

‘Fellow who was always thirsty and couldn’t get anything to drink—Tantalus!’

‘Yes, that *is* the gentleman’s name?’ she said approvingly. ‘The only interpretation I can place upon your classic simile,’ she continued with sweet seriousness, ‘is one highly flattering to myself and friend!’



‘Well,’ he admitted, ‘you two have made the winter here quite a—a different thing to what it would have been without you.’

‘We have not lived in vain!’ she observed, with a dramatic air of exalted triumph.

‘You are always up to fun,’ he said. ‘I wonder whether Miss Preston chaffs Staples as you chaff me?’

‘That is presuming that the cases are entirely parallel,’ she remarked with demure audacity.

‘Are they, I wonder?’ he questioned, glancing at her a little searchingly and doubtfully.

‘We had better ask them,’ was her prompt reply.

‘They seem to get on very well together,’ he rejoined.

‘Yes; no sounds of battle reach our ears!’



‘I wonder are you ever serious, Miss Heath?’ he observed.

‘Sometimes—with people I like or dislike very much.’

‘I should like to see you in earnest some day—just for once,’ he continued rather stumbly.

‘It will be easy enough. Pick a quarrel with me; offend me; make an enemy of me! I can be an enemy in right good earnest!’ she replied laughingly, but a spark which flashed for a moment in her dark eye gave eloquent sign that she spoke no more than the truth.

‘But I don’t want you for an enemy, Miss Heath,’ he said. ‘It’s just the last thing I want!’

They had reached the house by this time, and Conyers and Chadwick, who were reclining in reposeful attitudes on the piazza, too



tired with doing nothing to sit up, had nevertheless just energy enough to hail them with amused interest.

‘I say, tell us what Staples has been up to? Have you pitched him out of the boat? or did he jump overboard, or what?’



## CHAPTER XXIV.

‘WE ARE IN LOVE’S LAND TO-DAY!’

THE stillness of a sultry day, the serenity of a warm, dull, hazy sky, are breaking up as the sunset hour draws near. The sun is sinking down towards the western horizon in a sea of lurid clouds; a little breeze is rising and murmuring amongst the pine-trees. In a narrow cosy nook of a creek on Lake Rosalie—the great lake, with its bold sweeping shore lines and fair green islands, which abounds in such shady creeks and winding inlets—a boat is drawn up; and in the boat are sitting—or rather, I should say, are lounging—two young people, Mr. Archibald St. Julian Staples and Miss



Violet Preston, both apparently very happy, and certainly very much at their ease.

Three sides of their cosy creek are dense thicket of palmetto scrub, fringed with tall flowering flags and rushes growing at the water's edge, behind and above which tower the slim stately pine-trees.

The fourth or lakeward side is screened from the open water by three cypresses rising from the shallows, their far-reaching roots slanting and spreading out from the trunks to drink up as much as possible of the life-giving liquid without which they would pine and die.

All the winter these bare white-branched trees have stood like skeleton sentinels guarding the evergreen forest, clothed only with the mournful-looking grey draperies of Spanish moss that fell like funeral veils about their lifeless-looking limbs; but now on every branch the tender spring buds are swelling and



bursting into lovely leaf, peeping in glints of fresh and vivid green through the long clinging wreaths of moss that are grizzled and hoary like an old man’s hair.

Mr. Staples has been reclining, in a *pose* more remarkable for ease than grace, looking like a bundle of angles, in the stern of the boat ; while Violet, in a soft grey dress, reposed in an attitude alike comfortable and picturesque, on a crimson shawl spread in the bow. Lately, however, it has occurred to Archibald St. Julian that he would like her to read him some poetry. This is a fancy which has possessed him several times of recent days, although Violet is not yet quite sure whether what he appreciates is the poetry itself or her rendering of it. Wherever Violet is, there is generally a volume of some one or another of our modern poets not far off. To-day she has a book of selections—Rossetti’s ‘ American Poems ’—in her lap.



True, they are not all modern poems, but she chiefly chooses out the more modern ones for her own reading and for the poetical education of Mr. Staples. The better to enjoy his initiation into American literature, he has scrambled over the seats interposing between them, and is stretched in the bottom of the boat at her feet, in a manner more than ever suggestive of a Newfoundland dog. Violet has selected for their reading to-day Joaquin Miller's 'Arizonian.' She reads well, and does justice to that most powerful of all his poems, which stands without peer in its own style, in its tropical and half-barbaric splendour of colour and passion, its wild and rugged force rushing like a mountain torrent.

Staples listens with creditable gravity and attention; but his appreciation of it has to be taken on trust, as he entirely ignores its characteristics as a poem, all the comment he



makes being with regard to the narrative, receiving it simply as a story related in rhyme.

‘My word, he was in a bad way, wasn’t he!’ he observes, with serious commiseration for the unhappy hero. ‘But if he went away for twenty years and didn’t write to the girl, he couldn’t reasonably have expected her to wait for him. And I don’t see how he could have taken up with a dark girl. Can’t understand a fellow’s taking a fancy to a nigger, if there wasn’t another woman in the world.’

‘She was *not* a nigger!’ Violet protests warmly. ‘How *can* you make such absurd mistakes?’

‘Well, he says she was a “beautiful bronze” and goes on about her “brown face,”’ Staples replies mulishly. ‘*I* couldn’t like a darkey girl—not if she was ever so handsome!’



Violet endeavours to impress upon him the difference between the aboriginal American and the African races ; but the only result is his stout declaration that a Red Indian squaw's as bad as a nigger. Staples will be an eminently satisfactory member of whatsoever political party he may in the future elect to join, he is so refreshingly thorough in his views ! Absorbed in their conversation, these young people both forget the flight of time, nor do they notice the gathering clouds and darkening sky, until two or three heavy drops splash down through the leafy canopy over their heads.

‘ Dear me ! ’ observes Violet, looking up placidly, ‘ I believe it is raining.’

They have but a broken and limited view of the sky from the sheltering shades of their aquatic bower ; but these sudden raindrops draw their attention to the fact that all the sky



which they can see through the network of crossing branches and drooping moss is becoming overcast. Swiftly, even as they look out and remark on the rain, and wonder if there is going to be a storm, a heavy murky yellowish haze creeps like a veil between heaven and earth, and seems to weigh down the air.

‘By George, we’re in for a storm I’m afraid,’ he remarks.

‘Shall we wait here in shelter till it’s over, or had we better get home as quickly as we can?’ asks Violet, not much disturbed, and marking the place in her book with a little bunch of water-grass.

‘Well, if we *were* in shelter here, I’d say “wait.” But this,’ casting a glance upwards at the interlacing boughs high above them, ‘would be no much protection against a tropical rain. It looks as if it meant to come down pretty



heavily too. I think perhaps we'd better be getting home.'

'All right, then; let us start. I balance the boat better in the stern, don't I?' she suggests, making her way to the stern seat.

'I think so. Anyhow, it's more sociable having you there than sitting with my back turned to you.'

He picks up the oars, and pushes the boat out between the sentinel cypresses—out of their sheltering creek.

'By George, it's blowing up!' he remarks as they float clear of the trees, on to the open water.

It is blowing up, indeed; the great lake, calm as a pond when they rowed out to their creek in the early afternoon, is rising into waves like the sea, as these large lakes are wont to do. Staples sets his course for home; they have a good three quarters of an hour's row before



them, even if he pulls his very best ; and in a very few minutes it becomes evident to them both that in such waters as these he cannot pull his best. The waves, rising higher and higher, roll full broadside on the little boat and rock it like a cradle to and fro. The big drops of rain come pattering thick and fast ; the cedar and cypress boughs rustle and mutter ; the long hoary banners of moss, which lately drooped so limp and still, stream out and fly wildly on the wind, and seem to struggle to tear themselves free.

‘ Better not try to keep straight on our course with the waves taking us broadside like this,’ he says ; ‘ I’ll tack, and try to make way crosswise,’ and he pulls the boat’s head round accordingly and rows across the long waves, so that the boat leaps and rides up and down over them, but does not rock in so alarming a fashion as before.



‘Don’t like this much, eh, Miss Preston, do you?’ he observes, in a tone that would be sympathetic if he allowed it to be so, but, as he carefully keeps the curb on his expression, is only brusque.

‘Oh, I don’t mind,’ she replies, with more amiability and well-meaning encouragement than strict veracity. Presently a deep sullen growl of thunder rolls threateningly over land and water; and suddenly, as if that muttered roar aroused the demons of the elements, a blinding storm of wind and rain sweeps over the lake and lashes the already angry waves into foam and fury. The moan of the storm-beaten trees rises to a wail. The rain pelts like a volley of shot on the little boat; the wild wind seems to seize and shake it in a savage grasp; the waves, risen to billows, toss and beat it about like cork.

Violet, turning pale, and steadying herself



in her seat, clutches the sides of the rocking and rolling boat; and Staples, realising the imminent danger of an upset, sees, and can only just see through the blinding torrent of slanting rain, that they are close to one of the little islands which are picturesquely dotted about in the middle of the lake. The current runs so strongly that it takes all his strength to head the boat on to the island and run her ashore. He manages to do it, but the boat is half full of water as it dashes in among the scrub and grates on the bank. He jumps up and hauls the boat up into a safe position, and then helps Violet out.

‘ I thought this was about the best thing to do. That’s a tittupy little cockleshell to weather a storm,’ he says.

‘ I thought it would turn right over,’ she replies, sincerely relieved at getting out of it.



‘Well, I wasn’t at all sure that it wouldn’t ; that was why I ran aground.’

Their island does not offer much scope for exploration. It consists of a long low mound of scrub, two pine-trees, one scrubby-looking young oak, a thick clump of tall bushes, and three or four cypresses standing out in the water.

‘We can get a little bit of shelter here,’ says Staples, installing himself and Violet in the most protected spot, between the pine-trees and the oak, in the lee of the thicket of tangled bush. ‘It’s about the best position we can get. And bad’s the best, he adds, truly enough.

A flash of lightning plays through the murky sky, and another muttered growl of thunder rolls nearer than before.

‘Isn’t it dangerous to stand under the trees?’ asks Violet, looking up at him appealingly.



Staples does not at all relish the storm and the wetting ; but he does relish being appealed to in that trusting way by Violet—relishes exceedingly her simple and natural recognition of his position as the stronger, the protector. It is the first time that ever any tone or look of hers has conveyed that pleasant suggestion of the old simile of the oak and the vine as being in the least degree applicable to him and herself.

‘ We’ve either got to wait here till the storm’s over, or face it on the lake,’ he replies. ‘ There’s the danger of lightning here, and of an upset there.’

‘ Cheerfully and practically put ! ’ she observes.

‘ I think, on the whole, we’re safest here,’ he continues. ‘ That little boat’s risky until the sea goes down a bit.’

‘ It is like a sea indeed ! ’ she agrees,



looking with concealed dismay on the white-capped waves.

They are standing close together, keeping well back in the scant shelter of the trees, whose branches afford but frail protection against the torrents of rain above and around, which break through and beat them down. Already Violet's hat is drenched, her pretty grey dress limp and discoloured with big rain-spots and splashes.

‘You'll get very wet,’ he observes solicitously.

‘I think we are both rather wet already,’ she answers, smiling; ‘nearly as wet as you were when you had to swim after the boat in Connor's Creek!’

Presently there was a deafening crash and roar, as if the walls of heaven were blown to pieces and fell rattling down to crush the earth, and a great lurid blaze wrapt all the landscape



in blinding light, as an inky black storm-cloud broke over their very heads.

Violet started with a low cry of terror, drowned in the reverberating roar, and made an impulsive step as if to rush from the dangerous shelter of the trees, then shrank back again, and with the same instinct of fellowship which makes the sheep cower together in a storm, she drew closer to her companion, and involuntarily, unconsciously, put out her hand to him. Thereupon he, not unnaturally, threw his arm round her, as if that arm could shield her from the danger.

‘ Don’t be frightened, darling!’ he said impulsively, holding her fast in a tender protecting embrace.

‘ Are you so afraid of the lightning here?’ he continued as he felt her tremble. ‘ We’ll do just what *you* like! If you’d rather risk it in the boat, *I* don’t care. It’s all the same



to me. I'd about as soon be drowned with you as live without you! One can die but once, and there's no better way to die than saving a woman one cares about—but then, you see,' he added with his accustomed practicality, 'I'm afraid I *couldn't* save you if that boat capsized in such rough water far out from shore!'

His declaration of affection was entirely unpremeditated. It had rushed headlong from his lips on the impulse of the moment's passion, without his conscious consent; he was himself almost as much startled by his own outburst as was the object of it. Partly because she was so thoroughly taken by surprise, and partly because she was exceedingly terrified by the nearness of the storm, she received his declaration in the safest manner possible,—that is, she answered nothing at all in reference to it.

'It was very silly of me to be so startled,'



she said, gently disengaging herself from his arm. ‘ A thunderstorm always makes me nervous.’

He stood quite silent for a minute or two, and then said in his boyishly abrupt way—

‘ I didn’t mean to tell you I cared for you. I suppose I’ve no business to care for any woman—at least, not to tell her so—an unlucky devil like me ! ’

His self-depreciation touched Violet’s soft heart, which was, in truth, very easily reached, though not very easily impressed beyond the hour.

‘ I think it is one of those trespasses that might be forgiven,’ she said gently with a little smile.

‘ *You* can forgive it, then?’ he rejoined quickly.

‘ I don’t see that I have anything to forgive. You have been very kind and careful of me,’



she answered, prudently retreating into safer lines.

‘It would be very likely I should be anything else, wouldn’t it?’ he replied. ‘I’ve always—for ever so long—wished that I could do something for you!’

‘Well, I think you pulled that boat ashore just in time to save me from a bath—if from nothing worse! I’m not sure, though,’ she added, with a judicious shunting of the conversation into a less personal line, ‘that it hasn’t been “out of the frying-pan into the fire!”’

‘I meant for the best,’ he said, interpreting her light words as a reproach. ‘I’m sorry if you think I’ve dragged you into danger!’

‘No, no; indeed I didn’t mean that. I’ve no doubt we are better here than out on the lake. I——’

Her explanation was cut short by another



deafening explosion of thunder that burst and rattled like a cannonade right over their heads, while simultaneously the sky seemed set ablaze.

She tried to control her natural nervous start and tremor this time, but did not succeed very well, when she saw, on the opposite shore, a great pine-tree scathed and stripped by the lightning, which for a second wrapt it in a dazzling serpent of flame. The tree still stood, but no longer erect; it swayed, leant on its fellows, and one great branch quivered and fell with a crash, like a living thing stricken.

‘Oh, it is very near!’ she exclaimed involuntarily. Her voice trembled a little; and Staples deemed the support of his arm again necessary.

‘Never mind!’ he said, with a clumsy attempt at comforting cheerfulness. ‘If it’s struck there, it’s the less likely to strike here!’



Poor little girl !' he added more softly, ' you're wet through ! Your dress is soaking !' laying his hand on her dripping sleeve, which, indeed, could not well have been wetter if it had just been dipped in the lake.

' You are as wet as I am,' she replied.

' Yes, but my coat's thicker than your dress, and it doesn't matter so much about me. But you're shivering. Lean against me ; don't mind ! I'll be distant and formal again to-morrow !'

She did not reject the offered aid ; she was very wet and cold, tired and nervous ; and there was something comforting and protecting in the firm close clasp and support of his arm.

So they stood under the dripping trees, seeking such poor pretence of shelter as they could find there, while round them the wind raged and the tropical rain poured, and their



soaked garments clung to their limbs, and every now and then the thunder rolled and crashed through the lowering sky, which seemed to open and reveal the heavens ablaze for one dazzling moment, then darkened as if a heavy curtain closed again.

Violet had no idea how the time went, but it seemed to her an hour that they stood there, drenched and shivering. Surely never had time so lagged and crawled ! As for Staples, he did not know whether it lagged or flew ; he took no count of time at all. All his consciousness was absorbed in realising that the storm bore its compensations with it. In no hour of sunshine would Violet have cowered so close to his side, and allowed his arm to clasp her, so unresistingly, and even willingly. She found some comfort in his tender and protecting care, although it was perfectly unavailing for any practical purpose ; he could neither keep her



dry nor act as lightning-conductor. But she was growing very tired of standing ; her wet clothes sticking like glue made her feel stiff and numb ; she was afraid she might ignominiously weaken and droop on his shoulder, which she had no intention of allowing herself to do.

‘ We cannot get any wetter than we are now,’ she suggested. ‘ May we not just as well sit down in the boat as stand here ? ’

‘ To be sure,’ he agreed, reluctantly unfolding his protective arm from her waist, ‘ if you like. I suppose you really are about as wet as you can be ? ’

‘ Yes. I think, except for the chance of drowning, we might as well be swimming in the lake,’ she said, with a faint smile.

‘ Well, I must bale the water out of the boat first,’ he said, and went down to the shore to accomplish this purpose. The boat was nearly full of water, so he found it better



simply to tip it up on one side than to attempt the slow process of baling. He managed to turn it right over on the bank and let the water pour out, and then reversed it. Out of breath with his exertions, he looked up to call to Violet, and found she was already beside him.

‘ There,’ he said, panting, but triumphant, ‘ now you can sit down. I’m sure you’re awfully tired.’

‘ Just tired enough to think that a wet seat is better than none,’ she agreed, gladly getting into the safely grounded boat. ‘ What a pair of drowned rats we do look ! ’ she added, looking up at him laughingly ; and although Staples was not a beauty at the best of times, and the rain-drops rolling down his long nose and sleek wet locks of lank hair sticking to his forehead were exceedingly unbecoming, her eyes had never yet rested on him with so soft, friendly, and appreciative a look.

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He sat down as near to her as he could.

‘Poor little girl!’ he said sympathetically; ‘you’re so cold, and so wet, and so tired! and there isn’t a dry spot for you anywhere.’

‘Never mind,’ she replied cheerfully; ‘we are doing about the best thing we can do!’

Staples was evidently in the mood compassionate.

‘Poor little cold hand!’ he said next, touching and clasping it; then, as the slender cold fingers slid gently out of his, he added, ‘Mayn’t I hold it, then? And mayn’t I—talk to you? I—I’ve said so much—I feel I—I must say more.’

‘No, no,’ she broke in hastily, ‘please, don’t!’

‘You mean that?’ he rejoined, quickly shutting himself up in his shell; ‘you’d really rather I said no more?’

‘Really,’ she assured him with a little sigh



of relief, seeing how quick he was to accept and obey her bidding.

‘ Very well, then, I won’t,’ he promised. And he kept his word.

As violent paroxysms are never enduring, either in animate or inanimate nature (if there is aught in nature that can be called inanimate), the violence of the storm now soon began to wear itself out. The wind, tired of its own savage riots, subdued its ravings to sobs and moans; the rain, exhausted with its fury, fell more and more weakly, until the big drops came splashing softly down like tears; the boom of the thunder followed the lightning instead of bursting simultaneously with the flash, and the intervals between the crash and the blaze became gradually longer. The waves too, were calming down, although the lake was still rough and would be rough for hours to come, long after the world was



shrouded in the shadows of the night, which was falling fast. But the water had smoothed sufficiently for the soaked and shivering pair to start on their homeward row; and glad they were to feel the boat leaping over the water, as Staples, wet and weary, spent all his strength upon his oars, and pulled with all his might; but Violet saw by his panting chest and doggedly set features that he was exerting himself almost to exhaustion.

‘Don’t pull so hard,’ she said kindly and anxiously; ‘you must be *so* tired! Do take it easily.’

‘I’m not—so very—tired,’ he replied, too much out of breath to get through even so short a sentence without breaks and pants. ‘Don’t mind about me.’

‘Do take a minute’s rest,’ she pleaded, leaning forward and laying just the tips of her fingers gently on his arm. In accordance with



her desire, he rested a few moments and drew long deep breaths and pulled himself together.

‘That’s better,’ she said, smiling.

‘I’m all right,’ he replied. ‘You are very kind,’ he added, his eyes cleaving wistfully to her pale fair face.

‘I ought to be,’ she said gently; ‘you are very good to me!’

‘Good?’ he repeated, ‘*that’s* not the word; one isn’t *good* to one’s—but you’ve told me to say no more, and I obey your wishes—always.’

And Violet looked at him gratefully and appreciatively, and liked him all the better for his obedience — although it is possible she might have forgiven him if he had disobeyed. And they reached home all safe, and Mrs. Whitworth threatened them with imminent malaria if they did not follow her instructions, and as her prescription comprised hot baths and hot beverages pleasant to the palate, the



truants both bent amenably to her treatment ; and, except that Violet had caught cold—an ordinary cold, which, however, caused Staples considerable anxiety, as he regarded it as a possible forerunner of fever or consumption—they neither of them were one penny the worse for their adventure.



## CHAPTER XXV.

‘ MAIS OÙ SONT LES NEIGES D’ANTAN ? ’

It was the time of roses ! Climbing roses straggled up to the house-tops, and buried the walls and framed the windows in leaf and bud and bloom ; great trees of roses towered up, tall masses of white and creamy and crimson flowers. The gardens were ablaze with all the colours of the rainbow ; the fragrant breezes were heavy with the perfume of myriad blossoms. The scarlet sorrel spread like a coral-coloured carpet over field and grove ; the stately oleander-trees were covered with their scented stars of pink and pearl ; the pomegranate hung out its vivid scarlet bells ; and



the great magnolia grandiflora, tall as the poplar and sturdy as the oak, unfolded the white cups of its mammoth flowers, whose rich fragrance, almost too potent for some tastes, loaded all the air around. Here and there in the orange-groves the odorous snow of blossom lingered still, while here and there again the young oranges were already formed, and looked like tiny green plums. The lakes were dreams of beauty, and all the earth lay smiling in the golden glory of the ripe Southern spring.

By way of some little off-set to the charms and delights of this matchless season, the mosquitoes had come—‘come not in single spies but in battalions!’ Like tiny evil ghosts they flitted on the piazzas at twilight; soft and low, their faint little sizz-izz-ing song pierced the ‘starry silences.’ In the deep stillness of the night that maddening melody ‘murdered



the innocent sleep.’ In the morning, when the household party assembled at breakfast, they made polite and kind inquiries about each others’ bites, and the social bottle of ammonia was handed round. Whether on account of a dainty and discriminating taste for the ‘young and tender,’ or a disinclination for the acclimatised residents, the mosquitoes let Mr. and Mrs. Whitworth alone, and favoured the rest of the party, in different degrees, with their attention. Violet lamented a disfiguring bite on her nose.

‘Never mind, Miss Preston,’ said Tregelva consolingly; ‘Staples has got one eye nearly closed already; he looks as if he’d been fighting! Another bite or two, and he’ll have both eyes bunged up!’

‘Do give me a little ammonia, Mr. Tregelva,’ pleaded Rosemary pathetically. ‘My finger is so swollen, I can’t put on a thimble.’



‘Well, don’t mind that, Miss Heath,’ he replied; ‘you don’t want to put on a thimble!’

‘Heaven be praised!’ she said devoutly, ‘I have no socks to darn nor buttons to put on.’

‘And I think if you had you wouldn’t do it,’ he observed, smiling, and applying the ammonia himself, with careful tenderness, to the little bitten hand.

‘If you girls will stay out on the water after sunset of course you’ll get stung,’ said Mrs. Whitworth. ‘There are *no* mosquitoes in the house—at least only a stray one or two,’ she added as one whizzed and sang in her ear.

Amongst other signs of the season, the great spring exodus of the tourists had begun; the northward-bound trains and steamers were crowded, and the hotels were closing one by one. The Osceola shut up a few days earlier than some of the smaller hotels; and on the



last afternoon that it was open several people from the neighbourhood dropped in for a farewell visit to the hospitable establishment, whose doors had stood open to them all the season, wherein they had enjoyed many pleasant hours. Amongst these visitors were the West Grove House party. The Osceola was emptying fast ; more than half its inmates had already gone north, and the parlours and piazzas looked deserted in comparison with what they had been a few weeks ago, filled with the lively crowd which the closing season had broken up.

Mrs. Whitworth, Rosemary, and Violet sat down in the parlour with the Ellicotts, an Anglo-American family, a delicate mother and two plain daughters, with whom they had made acquaintance during the winter, and who were going north the next morning. Mr. Whitworth and the young men moved off in the direction



of the smoking-room ; and presently, when the Ellicott girls went upstairs to finish their packing, and Mrs. Whitworth and Mrs. Ellicott were absorbed in conversation, chiefly about the latter's ailments and the former's prescriptions for them, Rosemary and Violet drifted apart to the further end of the long parlour and sat down by the open window and looked out across the broad piazza to the gardens.

‘How empty the place looks!’ observed Rosemary. ‘And to-morrow it will be deserted! The season’s over—it’s all breaking up! I see Pine Ridge looming up before me like a black wall!’

‘I *wish* you could come north with me, Rose,’ said Violet.

‘What’s the use of thinking of it? I know it can’t be managed. Lucky—lucky *you*, Vi! going north—going home—going back to London with your people!’



‘But I hate to leave you, Rose. It seems selfish to be going back home and leaving *you* in your exile, when you love London even better than I do, and would appreciate it more!’

‘That’s the way of the world. If *you* were homesick, Vi, little chance you’d get of going home! Well, anyhow, my dear, we have had a good winter together, and nothing good can last! We have had the season—now let it go! You know Tregelva’s going?’

‘He has been going for the last month.’

‘He really *is* going now. It appears that his mamma wants him back, and his governor thinks that as he doesn’t seem to be doing anything much out here he may as well go home.’

‘Wise governor!’ observed Violet; ‘though, after all, I should think it must come a good deal cheaper to board and lodge him out at West Grove than in London.’



‘They want him to stay on the ancestral acres, I think,’ rejoined Rosemary. ‘I suppose Staples will soon be following in his wake—or in *yours*, Vi! As to Conyers and Chadwick, I look on them as goods left out here in pawn.’

‘Conyers has eaten up his coats,’ remarked Violet, ‘and I believe he is beginning on his boots!’

‘Staples *began* with boots, didn’t he?’ said Rosemary, with a languidly amused smile. ‘Those memorable boots——’ She stopped suddenly, and the laugh seemed to freeze on her lips. No woman less given to starting or changing colour than Rosemary, but now she started almost violently, and her face turned from fair to pale as if a sudden shadow had fallen on it.

‘Rose, what’s the matter? Are you ill?’ asked Violet, quickly and anxiously.

Tregelva and two strangers were coming



along the piazza outside, a little distance off, and Rosemary’s eyes were turned towards them.

‘That’s very like—but no—it can’t be!’ she said, in a breathless undertone.

‘Like? Why, who is it, darling?’ asked her friend, also in an undertone, glancing at the lady and gentleman who were approaching with Tregelva. Rosemary gazed at them steadily, and rapidly regained her usual composure of voice and countenance.

‘It startled me for a moment,’ she said, in a tone carefully controlled and calmed. ‘It is George Raymond or his ghost!’

Violet flushed with sympathy. George Raymond here! the man whose summer pastime had spoilt two lives—had caused the death of one sister, and turned the sweetness of the other’s nature to bitterness, her faith to ruthless mistrust of all men for one false one’s sake.



Although Violet knew so well, and had known from the beginning, the story of George Raymond, she had never happened to see him ; and Rosemary's eyes had not rested on him since that fatal season of Letice's death.

‘ Is it ? Are you sure ? ’ asked Violet, looking more interested and excited than Rosemary, who had perfectly commanded her expression by this time.

‘ Yes—sure,’ she replied very quietly, but with a little betrayal of bitterness nevertheless.

The trio on the piazza were very near the window now ; the lady in the middle, and Tregelva outside. Violet gazed with eager curiosity on the gentleman nearest to the window as they approached.

He was handsome, certainly—tall, dark, aquiline-featured, rather stout, with a touch of grey in the short, crisp, curling hair ; but Violet's first impression was a faint sense of



surprise and disappointment. She had fancied that the man who had won all the love that it seemed Rosemary had ever had to give, had set such a mark on her young life, must have been something different from other men! And this was just a handsome well-bred-looking Englishman, of no very uncommon type. She had seen men of his style often enough before. Certainly, as he drew near she took note that he had very fine expressive eyes, and a sweet if somewhat subtle smile. But still she had expected to find in Rosemary’s faithless lover a more striking, distinguished, rarer type.

He and Tregelva and the lady were all chatting like old acquaintances. By the time they came up to the window Rosemary and Violet had drawn slightly back; and the trio, absorbed in their chit-chat, passed without glancing into the parlour, or noticing the two



girls screened and half-hidden behind the lace curtains. As they passed, George Raymond was laughing at some remark of Tregelva's. Rosemary set her teeth a little as that laugh fell on her ears.

As she followed, with her eyes, the tall, stalwart figure, so well remembered and once so dear, there was in her expression a faint, faint trace of the same sort of wonder and—was it perplexity, or even disappointment?—with which Violet had looked on him for the first time ; the sense of unreality which sometimes comes upon us at the sudden sight of a face once familiar and beloved, and long unseen ; there is something strange, surprising, startling in the recognition ; it is the same old face, yet not the same. We ask ourselves—Is that face changed ? or are we ?

‘He and Tregelva know each other,’ she observed.



‘What shall we do, Rose?’ Violet appealed to her.

‘Do?’ she echoed, lifting her fair head haughtily. ‘Walk out on that piazza! I am not afraid of meeting any mortal man. It is not *I*—she bit her lip resentfully as she felt it quiver a little—‘not I who should mind.’

She cast a vexed glance at Mrs. Whitworth and the other matron, sociably comfortable in their armchairs on the other side of the parlour.

‘Hope Aunt Em won’t be glaring, or looking aghast, or making a fuss. I can’t drop a word in her ear now, she’s so absorbed with Mrs. Ellicott.’

She reflected a minute, and then added resolutely:

‘Come along, Vi; come with me; we’re going to walk on that piazza.’ And out on to the piazza they went accordingly. Violet



regarded Rosemary with admiration and affectionate pride. Her face was calm as a waxen mask now; a tinge of delicate colour, faint as the hue of the inner petals of a white blush-rose, warmed the usual ivory paleness of her cheek; the only betraying trace of feeling on her part was the momentary flickering and fading of that delicate bloom as she came face to face with George Raymond on the piazza.

Tregelva smiled as the two fair women, in their pretty summer dresses, drew near; and promptly, although in a languid and perfunctory way, as if he had just energy enough for the formula and no more, introduced his friends Mr. and Mrs. George Raymond to Miss Heath and Miss Preston. Mr. Raymond was too much a man of the world to change countenance, and probably had left too many old loves scattered along his path for a sudden



chance meeting with any one of them to be a cause of much embarrassment to him ; but a very slight and almost imperceptible glazing of constraint came over his air as he acknowledged Tregelva’s introduction with a courteous salute.

‘Miss Heath,’ he said, in his deep, low, pleasant voice, ‘I think——?’ he paused and waited to take his cue from her.

‘Yes, I think we have met before, many years ago—so long ago that we might be forgiven for having forgotten it,’ she replied, smiling, with a certain cool hauteur, but withal so lightly and easily that Violet felt prouder than ever of her friend. She followed Rosemary’s eyes with sympathetic curiosity as Rosemary looked at Mrs. Raymond, with a calm and courteous glance which betrayed no feeling and told no tales, and yet took a comprehensive survey of George Raymond’s wife.



To a woman, her rival, past or present, is scarcely less interesting than her lover. Whether the love-story be a living romance or, as in this case, a dead and buried thing, she always looks with curiosity—often with even more curiosity than antagonism—on the woman who has supplanted her; and Violet, for friendship's sake, now regarded Mrs. Raymond with well-nigh as much interest as did Rosemary. They saw a pale and pretty, and just a little *passée*, woman—tall and slight and fair, faded as light blondes fade, as if the bloom and colour were washed out of them—with a sort of well-bred listlessness of manner, and withal a polite readiness to enter into conversation, and a social aptitude for spinning small-talk out of nothing. She fell lightly and easily into chit-chat with Rosemary and Violet whilst the two gentlemen walked in together.



Presently Rosemary gracefully drifted away from the rest of the party, and returned to the parlour to Mrs. Whitworth, who, as her quick-eyed niece had seen through the window, was now sitting there alone.

‘ Aunt Em,’ she said, abruptly and confidentially, ‘ George Raymond and his wife are here ; Mr. Tregelva knows them and has introduced us to them ; we have been walking with them on the piazza.’

She smiled a little scornfully, with reassuring, if disdainful, coolness as Mrs. Whitworth’s eyes opened wide with an aghast and astonished expression at the news of the proximity of the wicked wolf whom she had not seen since, years ago, he had prowled round her fold.

‘ Remember him or forget him, Auntie dear, just as you like,’ Rosemary added impressively ; ‘ only, of course, *if* you remember



him it is as a matter of perfect indifference—a slight acquaintance of long ago merely.’

‘Certainly, certainly,’ Mrs. Whitworth agreed vehemently—‘the merest acquaintance. And I’m sure I don’t want to recognise him at all unless I’m obliged.’

‘I think it will be advisable not in any way to seem to avoid recognition,’ Rosemary suggested coolly.

Mrs. Whitworth was not, however, put to the test of a meeting with the wolf for some little time, as Tregelva presently left his Raymonds, and devoted himself to his own party. He and Staples appeared in the parlour, each with a flower—Staples bearing a scarlet pomegranate blossom, which he somewhat sleepishly held out to Violet; Tregelva bringing a half-blown magnolia, which he presented to Rosemary.

‘It seems to suit you somehow,’ he said,



looking at her with a tell-tale gleam in his lazy blue eyes. And he was right: there did seem to be something akin between Rosemary’s pale and splendid beauty and this gorgeous white tropical blossom, spotlessly snowy as the lily, and richer than the red, red rose.

She pinned it on her dress, and looked at him with her slow, sweet, imperial smile.

‘Come, let us have a stroll under the trees where there’s shade,’ she said amiably. Accordingly she walked off with Tregelva, and Violet with Staples; and none of the West Grove party came into any contact with the Raymonds again until supper-time, when it happened that the arrangements of the tables brought them together. But, happily, the Ellicotts being at the same table, and seated beside the Whitworths, saved Rosemary’s uncle and aunt from close contact or compulsory conversation with the gentleman whom they



habitually alluded to as 'that scoundrel.' They exchanged bows and formal salutations, and that was all. Rosemary herself gave no sign of consciousness. She was calm and gracious and smiling. Even Violet, who knew her so well, could detect no tell-tale expression on her face or in her manner. As to Tregelva, he had never known her more charming. He was enjoying himself extremely. Rosemary was more appreciative of his entertaining qualities than he had ever known her before. She seemed amused by his mildest humour, and showed unusual interest in his reminiscences of the turf, to which as a rule she was passably indifferent. But to-day she was all sweetness and sympathy. There was not a ruffle nor an angle in her; and he was blissfully unconscious of there being an *arrière-pensée* in her sweet and responsive acceptance of his attentions.



Her own party, the three who knew, watched her with mingled surprise and admiration. Now and then George Raymond looked at her when her eyes were turned another way; but there were other eyes that kept an imperceptible, an almost involuntary, watch on him. Violet was wondering—did *he* remember? did he seek to look beneath the fair impenetrable mask of Rosemary’s serene smiling face and see how much *she* remembered? did he ‘in his mind’s eye’ see her as she had been—the young, innocent, joyous girl, almost a child, with ‘the wild freshness of morning’ clinging about her like dew on a rosebud! Did he contrast that fair light-hearted child with this pale proud beauty, with the habitual curve of disdain and hauteur about her red-ripe lips, the large dreamy inscrutable dark eyes that held their secrets deep? Did he realise at all what his double



perfidy had done to the living as to the dead? Did Letice's delicate and fragile loveliness arise before him, and the memory of that too tender human lily which broke beneath the first storm reproach him out of her sister's eyes?'

He gave no sign to show. Probably he had lived so much of life since that long-past season, and so many fresher and more vivid memories overlaid it in his mind, that he only looked back as through a mist to the incidents of that year.

And as he glanced at Rosemary when her eyes were turned away, so she, when his were averted, looked at him—looked, with wondering and half-incredulous eyes, as on an embodied dream. And it was like a dream to her; she seemed to be looking back at him across a wide, wide, bridgeless gulf, from a cold and passionless height—looking down



upon a past too far off for a breath from it to reach her, although she saw it pictured clear in the distance—clear in colour and detail, but far, so far, away!

Of all emotional experiences, there is none more strange and dreamlike than to meet again the object of the passion that marred a life and turned the course of the deep waters of our destiny into another channel, when that passion is a dead thing and in its white ashes no fire smoulders. We can never realise in its full force the death of love until we look upon its object living.

So common!—and yet so strange, so pitiful! Common as death, and not much less bitter, when we realise all that it means—that we have outlived that portion of our life which seemed its *all*. For it seemed the very vital flame itself—the pulse, the beating heart of life. Yet it is dead; and we live on! We



look on the face we once loved, living, warm with the colours and the smile of life—and yet it is like a dead thing, now the glamour that transfigured it has gone. The glow of love has passed, as the hues of life have gone from the dead—as the roseflush of sunset from the Jungfrau's brow of ice when the last of the Alpine glow has faded. And that which is left is but as the form without the soul—

So like the same, yet not the same  
For ever—ever more !

These mental crises, which bring the past into sharp collision with the present, seldom escape hurtling the future too.

Rosemary felt all this—felt all the strangeness and bitterness in the superficiality of this casual meeting ; and yet the strangest thing of all was that she was so calm. Her heart was cold and fixed as if the dead love's chill had frozen it.



She listened, with that form of civil interest which is only a degree removed from indifference, to the Raymonds’ talk about their plans and movements. It appeared that they had come out to Florida for the winter, partly for Mrs. Raymond’s health, partly for pleasure ; they had travelled all over Florida, from the Gulf Coast to the Indian River ; and of course Mr. Raymond had not stayed there all the season without finding his pleasure-trip run into business. He had gone in for some investments—purchased a plot of land here, and some railway-shares there ; amongst other things, he had got a young grove which he was going to leave in the hands of an agent. This business, as yet not quite settled, was what detained him in this neighbourhood so late in the season. As the Osceola closed the next day, they were going to move on to Altaville and put up there for a week, until Mr. Raymond had completed



his arrangements and was ready to return to England.

Tregelva also talked of his return, and of course of the races he should miss and the races for which he should be in time. Violet, being nearest to the Raymonds, chatted with Mrs. Raymond a little; the Whitworths devoted their chief attention to the Ellicott family, without in any way appearing to slight the Raymonds.

Staples sat and looked across the table at Violet, and at his scarlet pomegranate flower glowing vividly on the cream-white of her dress; and, although he would rather have been seated beside her, made the best of his position as her *vis-à-vis*; and altogether the supper-hour, which might have been an embarrassing ordeal for

More than one and more than two,  
passed off pleasantly enough.



Violet and Rosemary went upstairs to one of the now many vacant bedrooms to dress for the homeward drive; and, as the horses were not yet at the door, they lingered up there, apart from the rest, finding themselves *tête-à-tête* for the first time since the meeting with the Raymonds that afternoon.

‘It is a dream, Vi!’ said Rosemary, with a far-away look in her great dark eyes—‘a ghost! It makes me realise——’ She paused, and her brow darkened.

‘Realise—what, dear?’

‘How poor and paltry is this thing that we call *love*,’ Rosemary replied, with passionate scorn; ‘this miserable moonshine that we talk of as “immortal”—poor petty passion of a day! *Our* little life’s short—but this boasted, be-poetised *love* is shorter still!’ Her lip curled, and a sombre light glowed in her eyes as she added, in a deeper, lower tone, ‘Oh,



this poor chaff and froth—this *dream*! Did Letice die for *this*?’

Violet clasped and pressed her hand in silence. Seldom, indeed, did it happen that Rosemary uttered her sister’s name.

‘Oh, *I* am right, Vi!’ she exclaimed after a minute’s pause, with the same ring of scornful passion in her tone; ‘not *you*! You are too gentle, too soft, too credulous! You dream and romance about this vanity of vanities! You look reproach at me, as if I were playing with the very sacred fire of Heaven—when I treat it as it deserves—this wretched flicker of a day, that dares to call itself *love*! No! I have no mercy on it—why *should* I have? And you, Vi, even you, have found out that there is no truth in your pretty fiction of “one love, one life!” *You* have lived to learn *that*!’

‘Yes; love is only mortal—I see that now,’ Violet admitted slowly. ‘But, for all you say,



Rose, it’s still the only thing that can turn earth into heaven, or—the other place!’

‘The other place!’ Rosemary echoed, with a reckless laugh. ‘It doesn’t take so marvelous a power to turn this world to *that*. I sometimes think that this our earth is the hell of some happier world!’

‘The purgatory, rather,’ rejoined Violet; ‘that is one of Max Randolph’s ideas!’

‘Max Randolph!’ Rosemary repeated, her ideas flying off in a new channel. ‘Vi, rejoice that our Max isn’t here! If he were——’ She came to a significant pause.

‘This morning I could have abided by my promise; but if he were here I’d not answer for myself to-night! But he’s not here—be thankful for it, and waste your compassion on Tregelva instead! He is going to drive me home.’

Even to her one trusted friend Rosemary



did not put into plain words what, indeed, she had no need to express—what Violet was feminine enough and quick enough in her sympathies, if not in her perceptions, to know that Rosemary must feel. No need to *say* how it galled her that, after all these years, the man who had deceived her—tricked, jilted her—robbed her of her sister, should find her free and single still !

Would he dare to think it was for *his* sake, in memory of him, that she lived unwed ?



## CHAPTER XXVI.

## BLOTTED OUT.

THERE were two routes from the Osceola to West Grove House. The shorter drive entailed crossing the railway—a proceeding to which nervous people sometimes objected, as the road crossed the ne close to a sharp curve of the latter, giving them not unreasonable grounds for apprehensions of a train rushing round the corner upon them. Rushing, by the way, is almost too strong an expression to apply to the Florida trains, which, as a rule, take things leisurely, in good old Southern style. But, anyhow, a train rounding the curve, even at a moderate rate, might render it exceedingly



uncomfortable for a vehicle caught on the line.

The other and longer road was also lonelier and more picturesque. It led through almost unbroken wilderness of pine-woods, and was merely a rough wheel-track, just wide enough for one vehicle.

Tregelva, who was to drive Rosemary home in the buggy, proposed taking this road—of course, not because it was the longer, but out of professed consideration for Miss Heath's nerves in regard to the railway-crossing; and Rosemary, who was not troubled with such weaknesses as nerves, smiled compliantly at his kind suggestion.

It was a gloomy night—moonless, heavy, hazy, and sultry; scarce a star gleamed in the misty sky; and in the shadows of the tall pine-trees it was almost pitch-dark; they could barely discern the faint white line of the road



between the dense blacknesses of the woods on either side. They had no lamp nor lantern; and the tone of Rosemary's observation that it was very dark seemed to demand a reassuring answer, which Tregelva had ready.

'It doesn't matter how dark it is,' he said; 'old "One Eye" knows the road. If I were to drop the reins and just let them lie on his back, he'd take us home all right.'

The horse he was driving was known—in allusion to the results of an accident—as 'One-eyed Jim'; and a very good horse he was, and well merited the character his driver gave him.

'We shan't have many more drives,' remarked Tregelva regretfully.

'We shan't have *any* more, home from the Osceola,' she replied, also with a tinge of regret.

'I don't know whether *you're* sorry,' he said, his lazy, languid accents a little quickened, 'but *I* am.'



‘I am not glad,’ she answered gently—very gently for Rosemary, of whom it could scarcely be said that her distinguishing attribute was gentleness.

‘I have to go,’ Tregelva continued; ‘my people want me back; and *you* are going away from West Grove House?’

‘Yes, I shall go home when Violet goes north. Our pleasant winter is over—it *has* been a pleasant one; and the summer is close upon us, and the time for a general breaking-up has come. Well,’ she added with a sigh, ‘nothing can last for ever.’

‘Some things can last a life-time if one’s lucky,’ he replied; ‘but I’m sorry if—if there’s to be nothing lasting, nothing left, of this winter.’

‘It has been a lost, wasted winter with you, I am afraid?’ she said sympathetically. ‘You haven’t seen any grove to suit you; and you find you couldn’t take to Florida life after all?’



‘Perhaps I could—if—if I could have a home out here of the kind I’d like. But you—you would never like living in Florida?’

‘No ; I’ve had enough of it in my exile at Pine Ridge.’

‘I wonder—*has* my winter out here been a lost and wasted one?’ he continued.

Here ‘One-eyed Jim’ created a diversion by turning off the road into the wood, which just there, luckily, was sparse and scattered, taking the buggy lurching and plunging over the rough tussocks of scrub, and piloting it carefully between the trees.

‘Now what is he doing this for?’ Rosemary inquired placidly.

‘He sees some obstacle in the road that *we* don’t see,’ Tregelva replied with abiding faith in the animal’s intelligence. And, indeed, on straining their eyes through the darkness they could just distinguish the shadowy bulk of a



large tree fallen right across the road. Having skirted this obstacle, 'One-eyed Jim,' promptly and dutifully returned to the way wherein he should go.

'Good horse! he knows what he's about,' said his appreciative driver.

'He doesn't go very fast, does he?' remarked Rosemary.

'He knows he has got to be careful to-night,' was the reply. 'And he's taking us along quite fast enough. We don't want to cut this drive too short, when we shall have so few more—unless you're cold?'

'Cold—on such a night!' she smiled.

'I wonder,' he added, 'isn't there a chance that we may have some more drives—somewhere else—far away from here?'

'“Who is he that knows?”' she quoted dreamily.

If the prospect of imminent parting



inclined Tregelva to sentiment, it appeared to be not without its effect on Rosemary too. Her sometimes cold and sparkling brightness was subdued to winning sweetness. There was even an atmosphere of yielding softness, touched with alluring sadness, about her; and Tregelva knew of nothing save the prospective parting to which he could attribute this her apparently softened mood.

‘I hope we shall meet in England,’ he said;  
 ‘I—I should like you to see my people.’

She heaved a little sigh, as if contemplating with regret the improbability of such a pleasant contingency.

‘They will be very glad to have you back, won’t they?’ she rejoined with a gentle and modest air of retreat from personality, and a secret sense of sanguine satisfaction—not perhaps so very far removed in its essential



character from the complacent anticipation of the cat reclining on the watch near the mouse's hole.

‘Oh,—er—so-so,’ he answered. ‘The *mater*’ll be glad. The governor will, most likely, say I’ve been wasting my time and his money out here—unless the old boy happens to be in a particularly good temper; and he does seem to be rather in the mood sanguine at present. It appears that the gentle Juliet is smiling just now.’

Rosemary looked round quickly. She had forgotten to what the name of ‘Juliet’ applied, and wondered with displeased curiosity who she was whose smiles had such influence over Tregelva *père*.

‘The shares are going up,’ Tregelva  *fils* continued—and she drew a breath of relief as she remembered that Juliet was only a mine—and safe as a rival, whatever she might be as an



investment! ‘but I hope the governor isn’t building too much on it. Juliet’s smiles mayn’t be any more trustworthy than those of the rest of her sex.’

‘Have you really such a bad opinion of women?’ she asked, with apparently simple interest; ‘or is it just a parrot-cry caught up among other men at your clubs?’

‘*I* don’t talk much about women at my club, or anywhere else,’ he protested. ‘I’ve never had much to do with them—never cared much for drawing-room society. I think I told you so before.’

‘You have—several times. As you don’t care for women’s society, we ought to deem ourselves greatly favoured that you have graciously vouchsafed to permit yourself to be bored by so much of *ours*.’

‘*Yours*—yes; but you’re not like other women.’



‘Is that a compliment?’ she asked doubtfully.

‘As it was meant—yes. It means that you make other women seem insipid, milk-and-water, beside you.’

‘That is pretty good!’ she thought to herself, smiling in the darkness. ‘He is getting on!’

‘One-eyed Jim’ was trotting briskly along a clear stretch of road; they were more than half-way to West Grove House.

‘Now or never!’ thought Rosemary. ‘The time is short, and there may not be another chance like this.’

‘It’s the way of the world,’ she said aloud, with a touching accent of melancholy musing. ‘But it’s a hard way—that as soon as people have grown to be friends and get along well together it is always time for them to part.’



‘But sometimes they meet again,’ he said.

‘Ah, sometimes!’

‘We have been good friends, haven’t we?’  
he pursued.

‘Yes, we have. There’s one comfort,’ she added with one of her own characteristic turns of thought: ‘the best of friends forget each other more quickly than enemies do! As friends, we shall forget. As enemies, we should be safe and sure to remember to life’s end.’

‘Be my enemy, then!’ he rejoined, more quickly than usual. ‘Be anything, so that you’ll remember me!’

‘You wish to be sure of enjoying a man’s privilege—of being the first to forget?’

Rosemary never could keep up the rôle of soft simplicity for long.

‘You know I couldn’t forget you if I tried,’ he answered. ‘You know—you must have



seen—how—how much I've thought of you—how I've been getting more and more—interested in you. Of course I don't suppose you have thought as much of me?'

It was well for Rosemary's scheme of the future that in the darkness he could not see the little smile that lurked about her mouth. If he could, he probably would not have continued in the same tone, 'You'll forget all about me?'

'No,' she said, with a modest touch of earnestness that really was very well done. 'I shan't forget you. I shall think of you—sometimes—when I'm buried alive in my dreary exile, and you're happy at home in dear old England!'

'Why should not you be there with me?' he rejoined impulsively. 'Rosemary, you know how fond I am of you! Do you—do you care at all for me?'



‘Why do you ask?’

‘For the best of reasons. If you don’t care a fig for me, why, it stops here, and I say no more.’

‘And if—if I were foolish enough to care—a little?’

‘Then — I’d ask you — But look here, Rosemary—I’ve thought of you by your name so long, and you’ll let me call you by it now, won’t you? Well, see: I think it’s the shabbiest thing a fellow can do to go making up to a girl without letting her understand exactly what his—er—position—financial, and all that, you know—is. But you do know pretty well how I’m situated, don’t you? I’m the eldest son, and I must come in for all there is of Tregelva one day—but there’s been a pot of money raised on the old place, and it’s about all the governor can do now, and all I shall be able to do when I step into his shoes, to keep the



mortgages paid up and the roof over our heads—unless, indeed, the gentle Juliet turns out a bonanza. But still, when all's said and done, there always *is* the old place there, and it's a nice old place, though I say it, and the Tregelvas 'll hold their heads as high as ever in the neighbourhood as long as there's a shot in the locker. And—well, Rosemary, what do you say?'

Rosemary, who liked clear and definite understandings in such cases as these, had her words ready.

'The gist of what *you* have been saying is, if I understand you rightly——' With an eloquent hiatus, she paused for a reply.

'Is that I want to know if you'll marry me,' he replied with delightful plain speaking that left nothing further to be desired.

'Well, now, what would your people say?' she demurred.



‘ Oh, they’re all right. I can do what I like—and the *mater’s* always been anxious to see me married. No fear but she’ll be pleased—it’s a regular fad of hers that young men ought to marry; but I’ve never seen the woman I’d care to call my wife till I knew you. Well, is it yes or no?’

In the moment that elapsed before she gave her answer her thoughts were neither of her lover, nor of his family, nor of any future beyond the morrow. The wonder that flashed into her mind was, whether Tregelva would see George Raymond the next day—whether he would tell him the news of his engagement? In imagination, she was hearing the tidings imparted to the Raymonds, conjecturing George Raymond’s reception of it, even as she spoke the all-important monosyllable, ‘ Yes.’

‘ One-eyed Jim ’ was a discreet and trustworthy horse; he required little or no atten-



tion to be paid to his bridle; and perhaps Tregelva had never appreciated this judicious quadruped's virtues more highly than now, when his implicit reliance on the faithful Jim left his arms free to dispose of themselves according to his wishes. Although Tregelva took the situation coolly, transacting his affairs of the heart without losing his head, and, even as a lover, preserving his normal *sang-froid*—although he made few protestations and went into no raptures—yet he was not slow to avail himself of the usual privileges attendant upon an accepted proposal, whilst Jim trotted on steadily and sure-footedly through the dark glades of the pine-woods, wherein human eyes could scarcely distinguish the faint pale line of road stretching ahead through the deep shadows. When the sagacious steed turned suddenly off the road again, it was not at all on account of his driver's neglect of the



reins, but because they had arrived at a large pool in the path—a hollow, brimmed by recent rains, which Jim discreetly preferred skirting to splashing through.

‘He’s all right,’ observed Tregelva; ‘the old horse doesn’t like water, and he’s going round it.’

“‘One-eyed Jim’ is sure to be right, isn’t he?’ said Rosemary. ‘I like to see such faith—it promises well,’ she added demurely.

‘If a fellow has any sense at all he ought to know where to trust,’ replied Tregelva. He was not of a suspicious nature, although he rather prided himself on knowing a good deal of the world. He was not in the least mistrustful nor doubtful of Rosemary, although he understood her no more than he did the occult sciences. He thought she was rather a flirt; but he had been informed, on what he regarded as competent authority, that married flirts often



make the best of wives. And perhaps he was not wrong in his estimate of Rosemary, so far as holding that she would be loyal where she once pledged her faith, and that a friend so true and tender must have in her all the capacities for being a good wife.

As soon as the two friends were alone together Rosemary told her news to Violet.

‘It’s no secret,’ she said. ‘He is going to write to his people this mail. There’s no shilly-shallying about Tregelva, with all his *laissez-aller* ways; and he is free to tell his friends here, and I shall impart the glad tidings to Aunt Em to-morrow; but I wouldn’t tell anybody before *you*, my Vi!’

‘Then it’s really serious this time, Rose?’ said Violet, pressing her hand affectionately.

‘Oh, yes; it’s serious. After all, you know, Vi, we’ve left our teens some way behind, and it’s time we should settle; and I might do worse



And—he knows—the Raymonds,’ she added, more slowly, ‘and they’ll hear of it!’

Violet bent her head comprehendingly, if a little sadly, but made no verbal comment on this reason for satisfaction with her friend’s matrimonial prospects, passing on to other aspects of the matter which she deemed more satisfactory still.

‘I am so glad! He will suit you perfectly, I am sure. It is just what I should have wished for you, *Rosa mia*. You couldn’t do better in the way of family. Tregelva’s evidently the show place, the “big house,” of the neighbourhood—just the position for you! And, as to money, what people like these Tregelvas think poverty would seem competence to *us*. And he *is* such a nice, good fellow!’

‘I am glad you’re satisfied,’ said the happy bride-elect, with an air of indifference for her own part.



‘I was afraid that if he proposed you wouldn’t accept him,’ observed Violet.

‘Perhaps I shouldn’t, but for the two spurs that have pricked the sides of my intent; one, the impending return home. Anyhow, Tregelva, mortgaged or not, will be a better place than Pine Ridge! And then—this meeting to-day!—that put the finishing touch!’

‘Yes, I know,’ said her friend. ‘I think, dear, this day’s meeting will turn out to be a blessing in disguise, if it has brought you two together. And as to poor old Pine Ridge, why, when you have left it far behind, you’ll be thankful for it that anyhow it brought you to Florida and sent you to West Grove House.’

‘Optimist to the end, Vi!’

‘To the end! You talk as if all things were finished.’

‘I feel to-night as if they were. I have a kind of feeling, Vi, as if this season were the



crucial one of both our destinies—yours and mine.’

‘Well, if it is, and means to do anything for me,’ said Violet gaily, ‘it had better “hurry up,” for it is nearly over.’

‘Not quite over yet.’

It seemed doubtful whether Rosemary would again be brought into any contact with the faithless lover of her early youth—her brief chance meeting with whom had, nevertheless, had its effect and done its work. The Whitworths had, of course, given no invitation to the Raymonds to call at West Grove House, and would entertain no idea of driving to Altaville while the Raymonds were there. But one day Tregelva and Conyers—all unknowing of any strained relations or past connection between the two families—went over to Altaville; and a day or two after that, Tregelva,



who was taking his Rosemary for a drive in the buggy, proposed to drive on to Altaville, as they were near the Altaville road, and he would like to have a few more words with the Raymonds before they went north. Rosemary did not wish to betray any reluctance to meet the Raymonds, or, indeed, any feeling at all in connection with them, and thus could offer no objection to her new lover's proposition. Possibly the little quiver of excitement that thrilled her at the thought of meeting with George Raymond and his wife, by Tregelva's side, as Tregelva's *fiancée*, was not entirely painful.

So to the Altaville Hotel they went, and there they found the Raymonds on the shadiest piazza, in company with the other guests who were left in the hotel—now but few, as the majority of tourists and visitors had already set their faces to the north.



Amongst the ladies who lounged about in light dresses, with languidly waving fans, Rosemary singled out Mrs. Raymond at once; and, even whilst they were exchanging courteous though not enthusiastic greetings, Rosemary, looking at Mrs. Raymond's fair, faded face, felt with a keen, quick sense of pride and joy the contrast between herself in her full fresh bloom and regal grace, and this pale, washed-out blonde who had been 'preferred before her.' She speedily detected, by a trace of feminine interest in Mrs. Raymond's languid look as it turned from herself to Tregelva, that the Raymonds were cognisant of the new aspect of affairs and of her position as Tregelva's chosen bride-elect; and when George Raymond came up and joined the group, *his* acquaintance with the situation was also evident.

At first they only talked of the impending



return to England. The Raymonds would be moving in two days; Tregelva now thought he would stay on at West Grove House until Rosemary and Violet left. Presently, while Tregelva was talking to Mrs. Raymond, Rosemary found George Raymond by her side. He bent towards her with a courteous smile of complimentary significance as he said in a slightly lowered voice :

‘ I hear I have to congratulate my friend Tregelva, Miss Heath ? ’

‘ Don’t you think you might congratulate me too ? ’ she said, looking calmly in his face with a slight haughty smile.

‘ Tregelva’s the best of fellows,’ he replied, ‘ but you will pardon me for thinking that he is the most to be congratulated.’ There was a tendency to sentiment in the tone, if not in the words, of the commonplace compliment, which revealed that he would be ready for tender



reminiscence if she chose to encourage it. She felt the possibility, and hated him !

She raised her head, and shot one look at him that would have scathed him if eyes could blight—one withering glance of implacable scorn and hatred—one flash of the fire of undying wrath and memory ! It flashed and faded : her fair face was calm and impassive again in a moment ; she turned from him to Mrs. Raymond with a smile, and made some pleasant passing remark to her, and took care that the conversation thenceforth should be general, and that there should be no chance of another word apart between her and George Raymond. Neither then nor ever, she resolved, would she allow one such word from him again ! never, in all the days to come !

That look of hers was the seal which closed that volume of her past. She shut it, locked it, thrust it away far, far from her, her



mind made up to look no more for ever on any images which recalled the old love, all reminiscences of which were simply hateful to her now.

If memory had been but a material thing, with what ruthless joy she would have pushed it into the red heart of the fire, or sunk it deep in the deepest lake! Although the waters go over such remembrances without drowning them, and even the fire of hate fails to burn up and destroy all the memories of love, yet to a certain extent our thoughts are within our own command. We *can*, if we so will it, turn our eyes unflinchingly from morbid contemplation of the past—fix them resolutely upon the future. And thus Rosemary now, once and for all, put behind her all reminiscences and memorials, all the ‘trivial fond records,’ of a love that had turned to loathing, of which now there was nothing left save



that shrinking recoil and hatred of any train of association that recalled it, and an abiding wonder—what *was* there, what could there ever have been, in this man to win such love from two such women as herself and Letice, and work such havoc in two lives? The glamour even of memory was gone for ever! she had turned over a new leaf in life; and, because the thought of the past was so hateful, she bent all her mind forward to the future—her future as Tregelva's wife!



## CHAPTER XXVII.

## ONE TOO MANY.

THE sun is still high in the western hemisphere, but the welcome shadows are lengthening, and there are cool green spaces of shade beneath the trees, where one may find relief and shelter from the dazzling brazen glare of the afternoon sunshine. High up, hidden in the boughs of a great magnolia-tree, a mocking-bird is pouring out his shrill, sweet, changeful carol.

And tender and gay the bird sang on,  
And cooed and whistled and trilled ;  
And the wasteful wealth of life and love  
From his happy heart was spilled !

Max Randolph turns his head to listen to the joyous songster, as he walks leisurely across.



the vivid scarlet fields of flowering sorrel towards West Grove House once more. As he comes in view of its old familiar face, he sees that the usual social party he has been accustomed to find gathered outside are conspicuous by their absence. The hammock swings empty; the rocking-chairs stand unoccupied; east piazza and south piazza are alike deserted; the mocking-bird sings to an empty house! It is the first time except in hours of pouring rain that Max has ever found it so. Always this hospitable house has seemed to smile on the approaching visitor—has opened its doors and windows to him, with an air of exuberant geniality, as if the walls could not contain its friendly spirits and they overflowed on to balcony and piazza. Now, although, certainly, doors and windows stand open as of old, not a creature is to be seen, inside or outside. He feels, with an unreasonable sense of



disappointment, that this seems but a cold welcome.

He finds the house door standing ajar, as it usually does. There is no bell; and if there were a bell there is nobody whose business it is to answer it. The way of proceeding is simply to walk in and walk about until you find somebody. Mr. Randolph does so accordingly. He modestly pauses in the hall and looks about him, and sees nobody. The smoking-room door being open, he glances in there. Nobody! Then he pushes open the parlour door, which is also a few inches ajar and looks in there, with the same result. Then he turns towards Mr. Whitworth's sanctum, variously known as 'his study,' or 'the office'—generally the office when strangers come on business bent, and study at other times—and, that door being closed, he raps on the panels, and receives no answer.



Then he makes up his mind to go out and sit on the piazza and wait there till somebody comes—if indeed he waits at all; and he is rather doubtful whether he will, for this is a disappointing reception to meet with, when a man has come back from a several weeks' cruise up and down the Gulf Coast. However, as he crosses the hall towards the piazza, Mrs. Whitworth comes in from the kitchen regions by the back-door steps.

‘Why, Mr. Randolph!’ she exclaims, with cordial welcome; ‘it’s *you*, is it? Well, I thought I heard *boots*!’

‘Not creaking very badly, I trust?’ he responds. ‘And how are you all, Mrs. Whitworth? I was looking about and wondering whether I was lucky enough to find anyone at home.’

‘Well, *I’m* at home, you see; but I think I’m about the only one there is. Those girls



are off somewhere with some of the boys. The boys are nearly all scattered; but we've got a few here still. Chadwick and Conyers are getting some fish for supper. I hope, for your sake, they'll catch a good dish of perch. And, by the bye, I think I heard the girls say they were going on Lake Annabel.'

It occurs to the visitor that Mrs. Whitworth, who wears a somewhat preoccupied air of business, and has issued from the domestic regions, was probably disturbed in some household industry by his arrival; and he presently puts forward an only partly unselfish suggestion that he 'might stroll round the grounds, and see if he came across any of the other members of the party'—a suggestion which Mrs. Whitworth is prompt to second.

'I dare say you'll find those girls out in the boat on Lake Annabel,' she observes, not wasting breath on the supposition of his following



in the track of the fishermen to Lake Rosalie.

Towards Lake Annabel, accordingly, Max Randolph took his way. He crossed the grove, and followed the narrow footpath through the scattered wilderness of oak and pine. He had got out of sight of West Grove House—and, indeed, of any house or habitation at all, as the trees shut in the prospect, and prevented any outlook beyond a few yards—when he came in view of two young people seated sociably, not to say affectionately, on a fallen trunk—Rosemary and Tregelva. He could not see their faces, as it was almost a back view of the *tableau* that presented itself to his eyes; but he recognised their figures—especially hers. Well indeed he knew of old the blue and white striped dress, the coiled waves of red-gold hair.

They, of course, could not see him approach-



ing along the path behind them, and his steps fell noiselessly in the loose soft sand. So there was nothing to disturb their peace of mind, nor to break up the picture, which was an interesting one, especially to Mr. Randolph.

Although this track leading through the wood to Lake Annabel was not a private path, yet it was very seldom trodden by any save the inhabitants of West Grove House. The lovers were well aware of the distribution and dispersion of the other members of the household; they knew that Violet and Staples were safe out of the way on one lake, Chadwick and Conyers on the other, Mr. Whitworth out on business, and Mrs. Whitworth at home on domestic duties bent.

Thus, as they deemed themselves entirely secure from either prying eyes or interruption, Tregelva's arm was round Rosemary's waist, and her head reclined trustfully on his shoulder.



Max Randolph looked for only a moment on the *tableau*, so evidently not intended for any other eyes, and least of all, perhaps, for *his*!

He felt it would be embarrassing to intrude on this affectionate and happy pair, undignified to retreat. Fortunately, a narrow track branching off through the wood just at this point, offered him a third alternative, and he lost not a moment in deciding upon it. This track landed him eventually on the bank of the lake, although by a rougher and more round-about route than the broader way on which the lovers' *tableau* unconsciously played the part of Lion in the Path.

He looked out on the lake, and saw the boat, with Staples at the oars, and Violet in the stern, glide out from the shadows of the overhanging trees. Another happy pair! But if as happy as the first, their contentment and devotion were less demonstratively evident.



Possibly, Max thought with a grim smile, the difference might be due to the difficulty of combining the occupations of rowing and love-making—except in its tamer forms of mere verbal expression. His keen-sighted eyes perceived that Staples wore a supremely contented look, and that Violet was smiling happily as she looked in her companion's face. He felt unreasonably inclined to quarrel with somebody; he did not particularly care whom—perhaps Tregelva for choice. It appeared to him a foolish waste of time and trouble to call at West Grove House at all. He had a mind to turn back at once, and return no more to this his old haunt, where it seemed to him clear that he was now not wanted, where the rôle allotted to him seemed to be the very undignified and unpleasing one of an unwelcome intruder on interesting *tête-à-têtes*.

Perhaps in obedience to this impulse of



pride and temper, he would have turned away from the spot, if the couple in the boat had not just then chanced to glance ashore and catch sight of him. He saw them look, and lean to look again—saw them bend forward to speak to each other, Violet the more eagerly of the two—saw how, evidently in compliance with her request, Staples turned the boat's head towards the shore—towards the spot where he stood. He waved his hat in sign of greeting as they approached, and stepped down to the brink to meet them.

‘So it is really you!’ exclaimed Violet gladly, leaning forward with a joyous smile as the boat grazed among the rushes.

‘Will you get out, Miss Preston?’ asked Staples, shipping his oars, and looking at her inquiringly.

‘Certainly,’ she replied, rising with alacrity. Staples rose too, and offered his hand to help



her ashore. Randolph, coming close to the boat, also offered his.

‘One apiece!’ she laughed, giving a hand to each as she stepped over the side. Her hand naturally rested a good deal longer in the clasp which was a greeting and a welcome than in that which was merely a helping hand.

‘I would not believe it was you at first,’ she observed; ‘Mr. Staples said he was sure it was.’

‘Even I—in the flesh; not my ghost come back from the Gulf Coast to haunt you!’

Violet laughed happily, her fair face a little flushed with the pleasure of meeting, which her frank eyes did not conceal.

She was glad to see him, and she made no disguise of it. For the moment she had almost forgotten the circumstances which had attended his departure—forgotten that the secret of her heart was no longer hers alone,



was trusted to Rosemary's keeping—forgotten even that she *had* a secret. And when she remembered it, it brought no shade of embarrassment into her manner, no cloud of constraint between herself and the man who little dreamt of the part he, all unconsciously, played in her life. Still frankly as ever she looked up at him with her clear eyes, her candid smile. Why should she be embarrassed or confused with him? *He* did not know what had passed; and Rosemary was loyal and would never betray. And she had always been used to welcome Max Randolph with open and friendly pleasure. Why should she not now be just as she had always been? A change in her manner might arouse his wonder—perhaps his suspicions; the old unfeigned and fearless cordiality could bear no such danger with it.

Violet did not consciously and deliberately



reason thus with herself—at least not until afterwards. She merely obeyed her impulses, which, in this instance at least, guided her unerringly in the identical line which cool reasoning would have dictated; for if she wished to keep the secret of her altered feelings from Max Randolph, what better means could she adopt than to preserve an unaltered manner?

Max felt himself mollified by the warmth of the greeting which he received here. *Here* there was no doubt that he was welcome, no mortifying sense of being one too many. It was poor Staples now who was the odd one; and the more Max Randolph's injured feelings were appeased the more Staples felt aggrieved. They forgot him in their lively mutual inquiries—the usual 'What have you seen and where have you been?' babble and chit-chat of meeting.



‘I—I’ve got some letters to write,’ Staples observed presently. ‘It’s later than I thought it was. I think I’ll go in and do my letters now.’ He paused for a reply, and, finding no appeal to stay and postpone his correspondence for awhile, he added, ‘I daresay Mr. Randolph will take you for another turn on the lake if you want another.’

‘It’s the loveliest time of the day,’ she replied: ‘it seems a pity to go in now?’ and she turned towards Staples with a kindly smile, and a self-reproachful twinge at her heart, which organ, Rosemary was wont to tell her, was made of nothing firmer than butter.

‘A great pity,’ Max assented promptly, taking upon himself to answer the remark. ‘Come—let us have a row round,’ and he handed Violet back into the boat.

‘Poor Staples!’ he observed as he pulled out into the middle of the lake, and, glancing



back to the shore, saw the disconsolate figure of Staples disappearing among the trees, 'I think he wishes me back on the Gulf Coast!'

He looked at Violet and smiled. She smiled too, lips, eyes, dimples, all suffused by a soft radiance, transfigured by a tender flush and light of happiness.

She was not sufficiently sorry for Staples to cloud her gladness in having Max Randolph in his place.

The afternoon was mellowing towards evening; the declining sun was tangled in the feathery tops of the pine-trees. Not a breath of wind stirred the leaves nor ruffled the glassy surface of the lake, save where the ripples, running ashore, whispered faintly among the rushes, and where the dipping oars broke up the mirrored landscape. Violet leant back and dabbled her fingers in the water with dreamy content.



‘Isn’t it lovely!’ she breathed happily. ‘It seems a sin to be on land. Why is there such a delight in getting off the solid earth?’

‘Is it the charm of trusting to an alien element—an inimical element, that would be death if it had us down there in its depths?’

‘I thought it was going to get *me* the other day, when Mr. Staples and I were caught in an awful storm on the big lake,’ she said, and related their adventure.

‘What was he thinking of to keep you out till the storm came on?’ was Max’s disapproving comment; ‘he ought to have seen it coming!’

‘He couldn’t: no one could,’ she replied staunchly. ‘And he was so good, so kind and careful, doing the very best he could for me.’

‘I wonder if you’d speak up in *my* defence as warmly and loyally?’ he said, casting one



of his questioning, half-smiling, under-glances in her face.

‘Of course not!’ she exclaimed jestingly. ‘I wouldn’t advise you to trust your character in *my* hands. Don’t you know I’d rend it piece-meal?’ she continued with a low happy laugh. Her heart was unreasoningly light; it was so sweet to be thus face to face with Max Randolph once more, alone with him out on the water in this little boat, floating on this lovely lake, radiant and pure and peaceful as a happy dream!

Her whole soul rested, softly lapped in the bright and peaceful influences of the hour and scene, with no thought of the future, no shadow from the past, to mar the present.

‘Are you glad to see me back?’ he asked, half lightly, half seriously.

‘Yes, of course I am,’ she replied in the same tone. ‘Was I not always glad to see you?’



‘You are always good to me,’ he rejoined appreciatively and gratefully.

‘Yes, I treat you better than your deserts,’ she said, smiling.

‘I have often thought of you,’ he went on. ‘I’ve got a little sketch for you—little study of Gulf Coast landscape.’

‘And how many for Rosemary?’

‘Oh, a whole portfolio-full, of course. She’ll value them so much! They’ll be her dearest treasures. Miss Rosemary as lovely as ever?’

‘Yes, except for a couple of mosquito-bites, which are nearly well now.’

‘Wicked of mosquitoes to bite *her*, isn’t it? She’s been on the warpath, working havoc as usual, I suppose?’

‘Oh, yes,’ Violet assented, but delicately refrained from adding any allusion to the conquest of Tregelva. She left Rosemary to make



her own confidences, and tell her own news in her own way ; anyhow, *she* would not be the one to impart the tidings to Max.

‘ And *you*?—are you up to mischief, too, eh, Miss Violet? ’

‘ No more than Satan always finds for idle hands to do ! ’ she laughed, but with a little colour flickering guiltily on her cheek, as the allusion reminded her of Staples and his declaration, any renewal of which she had successfully staved off—although being ‘ so very human ’ and so essentially feminine, she rather enjoyed than not the secret consciousness of her power.

The sun was sinking lower behind the tops of the pine-trees ; their feathery plumes stood out in clearest, finest pencilling against the fiery rays, stirless as pictures of trees in the still air.

Sweet and fleet the hour flew by, as such hours do ; and it was time to return, and Violet



smiled at Max, and heaved a little sigh to herself as he turned the boat's head to the landing-place. She was reluctant to return to the solid earth ; it was like a step back from dream-land to waking.

For just this little hour it seemed that she and Max had drifted away into a sweet, serene, dream-world of their own ; and now they must come back to a world they shared with others.

On their way home along the wood-path they came upon Rosemary and Tregelva sauntering ahead of them, walking discreetly now a few inches apart. Hearing voices behind them, the leading couple looked round, and, apparently sociably disposed, lingered till the others came up.

‘ Why, what conjuring trick is this ? ’ said Rosemary gaily as she gave her hand in greeting to Mr. Randolph, but addressed her words



to Violet. 'You went out with Mr. Staples, and, hey-presto! he has changed into Mr. Randolph! Show us how you do the trick, Vi; change him back!'

'The change doesn't please Miss Rosemary,' Max remarked. 'Would that I could turn myself into Staples!'

'What have you done with Staples?' asked Tregelva compassionately. 'Has an alligator got him? Or has he performed one of his celebrated swimming-feats again?'

The quartette did not remain together long, but parted into pairs again as before, and in this order returned to the house, where they found Conyers and Chadwick exhibiting the results of the day's sport, in the shape of a fine string of fish, to Mrs. Whitworth in the hall.

On hearing that Mr. Randolph was not now staying with his friend Martin, who had already gone north, but putting up at the Altaville



Hotel, the Whitworths hospitably insisted upon his taking up his quarters at West Grove House.

‘Bring your valise right over to-morrow morning—to-night if you like. You can have a room, two rooms, three rooms, *four* rooms if you wish!’

‘I think three will be enough,’ he replied gravely, ‘a sleeping-room, a dressing-room, and a study. Do not trouble about the fourth.’

It seemed quite like old times again to have Randolph once more amongst them, and this remark was made several times by divers members of the company. Mrs. Whitworth once added a suggestion that they should kill a fatted calf; but Max objected to this, as implying a slur on his moral character.

Perhaps the one of the party who was least gratified by his re-appearance on the scene was Staples, who wore the sulky expression



which once had seemed to be his normal one, especially when, after supper, on the piazza, Max Randolph took up his place by Violet's side as naturally as did Tregelva by his Rosemary.

‘The party has diminished a good deal,’ Max remarked to Violet; ‘we are a small company here to-night compared to what we used to be.’

‘Yes; happily, we have some left still to comfort us.’

‘Do you miss those other fellows?’

‘Well, yes—rather,’ she replied frankly. ‘They were nice boys, and I liked them; that bright boy Christie especially.’

‘You are like the girl in somebody's poem—forget whose, but I remember the sort of girl; like you,

She liked whate'er

She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.’

‘I don't think I scatter my affections broad-



cast *quite* so freely as that,' she answered. 'But I generally do like people who are kind and nice to me.'

'There! I told you you liked everybody,' he rejoined. Now *I* never like people merely because they like me. If they don't attract by any other quality, they don't attract me by that alone. But I suppose women are different?'

'I can't answer for my sex in general,' she said; 'I only know for myself, that I can't help liking people who like me.'

'You like me, then, don't you?' observed Max.

At this unusually complimentary and demonstrative expression on his part, Violet opened her blue eyes wide, with a half-amused, half-astonished smile. As this look was her only answer, he repeated his remark with amplification.



‘I say you have one reason to like me, then, even if you haven’t any other.’

‘But perhaps I have several other reasons,’ she replied. ‘You take me for nice rows on the lake, and for nice drives, and you bring me nice sketches from the Gulf Coast.’

‘Yes,’ he assented drily, ‘I do all that, certainly. Of course there are not many men would do as much.’

That day was one of the days marked with a white stone in Violet’s life ; and the stone to mark it was one of the biggest, whitest, most flawless and spotless of its kind. Although Max Randolph’s departure had been a relief to her, as peace after storm, yet his return was a delight—she had not dreamt until to-day what a delight it would be.

She had been enjoying life well without him, certainly ; but to be with him again turned her passive mood of contentment to keen, live,



active happiness—made the heart which only that morning had rested in passionless peace now beat high

With hopes and fears that kindle hope,  
An undistinguishable throng ;  
And gentle wishes long subdued—  
Subdued and cherished long !

She was so happy now in her relations with Rosemary too—happy and hopeful for Rosemary as well as for herself. She liked Tregelva well, and highly approved of the engagement ; she rejoiced to realise how utterly dead was Rosemary's girlish passion for George Raymond, all that was left of it being the undying sting of mortified pride, the sombre quenchless fire of resentment. Undying and quenchless indeed these would be in a nature such as Rosemary's. But Violet could clearly see that even these throbs of the bygone stab, which once had cleft her heart in twain, would cease to fret Rosemary when her path and the Ray-



monds' were parted wide and she was Tregelva's wife. She would be very happy with Tom Tregelva, Violet was sure ; all the happier, perhaps, because, although she liked him very much, she was not in love with him. For the susceptible and impressionable woman there is no more fatal error in life than to marry the man she only likes ; but for the woman of Rosemary's disposition it is the most sensible and satisfactory proceeding. For the woman whose nature is as ice covering latent fire, it is madness to take the step which is safe and wise for the opposite pole of womanhood, in whom the lambent play of flame on a surface of superficial warmth covers a core of ice, firm, and fixed, and cold. Rosemary was practical under her superficial romance, self-poised and self-centred underneath her apparent dependence on the love and admiration she inspired. Violet knew her friend's temperament well



enough to have no fears for her future, to rejoice in her prospective anchorage in the safe harbour of matrimony. And, for her own part too, her heart was unreasoningly and absurdly buoyant this night. Not only was she happy at being with Max once more—happy in his kind and almost tender attention—but also happy to think that they had met in the old frank and friendly fashion, that she had betrayed no sign of consciousness nor constraint, that he could have no suspicion of the secret of her heart. She knew that her unconcealed pleasure in his society, open as a sister's, was her best screen to hide that innocent secret for which, if it had been known, she would have blushed more than for a crime. She appealed to Rosemary to confirm her hopeful faith.

‘You don’t think he has any idea, Rose, do you? You see, I am exactly as I always used to be to him—just as free and



friendly as ever. You don't think he has an inkling?'

'No, Vi; I'm sure he has no suspicion at all,' Rosemary assured her sincerely. 'But, my child, don't you—don't you want him to have an idea?'

'Oh, no, no,' Violet protested. 'I couldn't look him in the face if—if he dreamt——'

'Not *yet*, eh, Vi?' said Rosemary with a keen but kindly glance. 'There! you needn't turn into a pomegranate flower!' and she laid her cool fingers with a half tender, half loftily superior and protecting caress on Violet's glowing cheek.

'And you say, Vi, he didn't ask you anything about me and Tregelva?' she added.

'No, only a general inquiry, in a chaffing way, about your being on the warpath.'

'I'd like to tell him myself,' said Rosemary, 'but of course they won't leave me the chance.'



He's in the smoking-room with the rest of them ; and men are just as big gossips as women, although nothing astonishes them more than to tell them so. I shall be truly astonished if those babbling boys leave me my own tale to tell ; but they *won't*, no such luck ! I shouldn't wonder if they have already imparted it to him. I'm only surprised that Aunt Em hasn't already been crowing and cackling over her bit of news, like a hen with one chick. She is so delighted that I am sure she would like to cry it from the housetops.'



## CHAPTER XXVIII.

## ‘HURT WITH JAR AND FRET.’

VIOLET was swaying gently to and fro in her favourite rocking-chair on the south piazza. Close beside her, Staples stood leaning against the wall with his hands in his pockets; while Conyers and Chadwick reposed in two other rocking-chairs at a more respectful distance.

‘A rose and three thorns,’ Max Randolph remarked when he arrived, accompanied by a negro carrying his valise.

‘And room for a fourth thorn,’ Violet replied, with a greeting that was glad and gay.

He made no inquiry after the other rose, but he perceived at a glance that neither she



nor Tregelva were in sight. He had not, however, long to wait for a glimpse of her; he had only been a few minutes lounging with the piazza party—Staples having somewhat ostentatiously shouldered himself along the wall a little farther from Violet, as if to offer room for the newcomer—when he heard the soft tap of light feet in the fashionable high-heeled shoes, which Rosemary’s soul loved, on the bare boards of the hall; and Rosemary, cool, fresh, and airy-looking, in a white dress with blue ribbons, came to the open doorway and looked out on the piazza, but did not cross the threshold.

She gave Randolph a smiling, easy greeting, remarked that they must be all baking in the sun out there, and drifted gently back into the hall and aside into the parlour. Max cast one of his quick keen glances through the parlour window. No, Tregelva was not there



—unless, indeed, he were hidden under the table or behind the curtains. Rosemary was, then, there alone! Violet was looking round speaking to Staples for a moment. When she turned her head Max was gone—had followed straight and direct in Rosemary's track.

Rosemary stood turning over the books on the parlour table when he came in.

‘Am I trespassing?’ he asked, standing beside her, and looking at her with keen intent eyes.

‘Not at present,’ she answered, with her cool, half-mocking, half-defiant smile.

‘I have to congratulate you,’ he said abruptly.

‘I thought you might be civil enough to say that someone else was the person to be congratulated,’ she replied.

‘Yes, I suppose that is what I ought to say,’ he rejoined in an indifferent mechanical



kind of way, gazing at her as if thinking far more of her look than of his own words.

‘And wouldn’t you mean it, then?’ she asked. ‘Do you pity him instead of—congratulating?’

‘No. I don’t waste my pity on my own sex. Men must look out for themselves.’

‘How fortunate for me that I have found one who couldn’t take care of himself—who took so little care as to “walk into *my* parlour!’

Tis the prettiest little parlour  
That you did ever spy!’

she sang lightly.

‘There is the fly,’ Max observed, as a man’s step was heard in the hall, and Tregelva passed the half-open parlour door, casting a glance into the room as he went by, but not pausing.

‘He wants you, I suppose,’ said Randolph drily.



‘Strange as it may seem to you, I suppose he does,’ she replied.

She turned to the nearest open window and leant out, and looked along the piazza towards Tregelva, who promptly obeyed her unspoken summons. The parlour had three windows on the south side, all three of course looking on the south piazza, and all open this sunny morning. Out of one of these open windows Rosemary leant; near to another one Violet was sitting outside on the piazza in her rocking-chair; to this latter window Max Randolph turned, and leaning out—as Rosemary was leaning from the adjacent one—he addressed some casual remark to Violet. She had Staples on her other side—Staples, adherent and monosyllabic—and she divided her attention between the two, as *she* thought, very fairly; but Staples apparently was of another opinion.



‘You want to get rid of me now, I suppose,’ he observed, in a sulky *sotto voce* in her ear, and, walking away, left Randolph in possession of the field. Conyers and Chadwick soon retired to the smoking-room, perhaps feeling the atmosphere of the piazza too heavily laden with suggestions of sentiment and associations recalling memories of ‘the girls they’d left behind them,’ for their peace.

Rosemary, in her Juliet attitude at the window, her arms resting folded on the sill, her ruddy-gold head leaning against the frame, was smiling as she talked in undertones to Tregelva, who, a more fortunate and infinitely more comfortably situated Romeo, had got an armchair outside, reposing luxuriously in which he conversed at ease with his beloved, with lover-like exclusiveness of attention.

At the other window the position was reversed ; it was Romeo who leant out of the



window to his Juliet outside ; but *this* Romeo wore a less happy expression. Max Randolph's best friends admitted that he had a morose streak in his temper ; he wore a somewhat morose and moody expression now ; and although he leant over Violet's shoulder, and Staples had obligingly left the coast clear, yet Violet was not so much the better off for his company. There was a cloud upon his brow, a caustic quality in his remarks, and a general tendency to grim irony in his manner.

Violet felt the atmosphere perceptibly although undefinably less bright, less clear, than yesterday. Perhaps the side-view, which Randolph could enjoy whenever he turned his head, of the Romeo and Juliet *tableau* in the other window did not tend to improve his spirits.

Juliet's fair head ere long began to retreat, drawing inch by inch farther back into the room ; her Romeo tilted his chair nearer and



nearer as he followed, bending farther and farther forwards, until at length she had drawn quite back into the room and was entirely lost to outer view, his pursuing head and shoulders also disappearing in at the window; while out of the other Mr. Randolph, with commendable discretion, leant farther and farther forward. Violet looked round and surveyed the situation with gentle humour.

‘You are like the little old man and woman in the weather-glass,’ she observed—‘one in, t’other come out!’

‘I feel as if I ought to scramble out altogether,’ he said.

‘I don’t think there’s any need; you haven’t left much of yourself in the parlour,’ she replied smilingly.

‘About as much as *he* has left outside!’

Presently Tregelva’s head and shoulders returned to their view as he drew back out of



his window, and sat down and lit a cigarette. 'There was, however, evidently no breach of peace between the lovers ; this was clear, not only from his contented expression, but by Rosemary's speedy re-appearance on the scene with sun-hat and parasol, which she had gone to fetch. Then the happy pair went wandering away into the orange-grove, leaving Max and Violet alone. He followed the diminishing figures with his eyes as they vanished among the trees.

'Things seem changed here, somehow,' he observed abruptly.

'They *are* a good deal changed,' she agreed ; and to herself she added that to *her* things seemed changed, and changed a good deal for the worse, even since yesterday. 'And you don't like the change much, do you?' she continued aloud, with gaiety a little forced.

'I? Of course I'm broken-hearted. That



goes without saying, doesn’t it?’ he replied, with his grimmest smile and sneer. ‘Suppose I shall be fished heels upwards out of the lake. There seems no place for me here now.’

This was unkind of him, considering Staples’s sacrifice and Violet’s welcome.

‘I think there’s room,’ she said quietly. ‘Rosemary can drive a tandem.’

‘If the team don’t kick,’ he observed drily.

‘She generally has hers in pretty good training,’ Violet rejoined.

‘Yes. Taught me to dance on my hind-legs, didn’t she?’

‘You wouldn’t dance on your *fore*-paws, would you?’

He vouchsafed a slight smile, but seemed on the whole far more in a mood of scowls than smiles.

He proceeded to express his sentiments in tones of half-disdainful disapprobation.



‘I suppose it would be too much to expect that a pack of men and girls should be shut up together all the season without making fools of themselves—at least, without the girls making fools of the men !

‘This is a serious business—this with Tregelva?’ he added, a note of interrogation in his voice ; and Violet looked at him questioningly in return, wondering how much he knew, hesitating in doubt whether, if Rosemary had not told him the position of affairs herself, she would wish Violet to enter into the matter.

He read the hesitation and questioning in her eyes, and, misinterpreting it, answered with a sort of resentful and scornful reassurance :

‘Oh, I’m not asking you to tell tales ! I suppose you think I’m endeavouring to pry into Rosemary’s private affairs ?’

‘No, *no*,’ she replied in quick and warm



protest, a little angered, but more hurt. ‘How can you speak so—think so? And why are you so cross?’ she added with a gentler accent of reproach. ‘You never used to be!’

‘Was I cross?’ he said, softening. ‘I didn’t mean to be—with *you*—ever! But we were saying just now, weren’t we?’ he added more lightly, ‘that things were changed all round? Perhaps my temper has changed too?’

‘Well, I wish you wouldn’t let it change for the worse, then,’ she rejoined, soothed and mollified, and slipping easily from serious into playful protest.

‘Glad you think there *could* be a change for the worse,’ he answered. ‘It shows that I haven’t been as bad as I might be.’

‘Not nearly as bad; and now, please don’t begin experimentalising as to just how bad you *can* be.’



‘If I did, it would only be to try just how far *you* would have patience.’

‘Please, don’t,’ she said, smiling, with a pretty, trustful and reconciled air.

The momentary ruffle was quite smoothed away ; they were the best of friends again ; but all the rest of the day there was not one serious word to be got out of Max Randolph ; he turned everything to a jest—not so much mirthfully as cynically ; he made sundry ironical allusions to Tregelva’s felicity and Rosemary’s all-puissant charms ; indeed, Rosemary played almost as prominent a part in his conversation as King Charles’ Head in ‘Mr. Dick’s’ compositions. Through his persistent chaff and impenetrable levity it was impossible to get any insight into his real mood and feeling—at least impossible for Violet, with those soft, dreamy, puzzled, shortsighted eyes of hers.

Staples, with an air of sulky self-effacement,



held aloof, wandered about by himself, and looked on from a discreet distance at Max and Violet, who kept together most of the time ; although Max, not being in his most amiable mood, was far from the most satisfactory of companions : his raillery was too biting, his pleasantries partook rather of grim irony than of honest mirth.

Violet, however, habitually good-tempered, accepted and entered into his mood, rallying him playfully, and answering him with banter light as his own, if less bitter. Being as soft-hearted as she was sweet-tempered, and mentally shortsighted, she felt a little qualm of conscience in the contemplation of Staples in his attitude of holding aloof from the world ; there seemed to her something forlorn in his aspect which appealed to her sympathies—a disconsolate expression even in the back of his shoulders, as he wandered about the house and



grounds like an unquiet spirit in voluntary exile. She took an opportunity of waylaying him under an orange-tree beside the gate as he was going out.

‘Going off all by yourself?’ she began sweetly.

‘Yes.’

‘For a walk?’

‘No; to work—to put up the fence.’

‘What an industrious boy you have turned out!’

‘There’s nothing for me to do but work,’ he said moodily.

‘There are plenty of other things, but perhaps it’s the best thing you can do,’ replied Violet virtuously, in her character of monitor.

‘Yes, I’m going to work,’ he said, with an air of gloomy recklessness which would have better befitted a declaration that he was going



to do some dark and desperate deed. He paused a minute, and then added—

‘ It’s just the way it always is. Of course I might have known—I never was lucky yet. Of course it’s just my luck.’

‘ I don’t understand,’ said Violet, a little guiltily.

‘ Nor do I exactly,’ he answered candidly, ‘ but I can see enough. There’s wheels within wheels with that Yankee fellow and you two girls ! ’

Violet was fairly startled. Had he, of all men—he, the clumsy, the ignorant, the obtuse and uncultivated—had *he* guessed what wiser, brighter, more experienced than he had never suspected ?

She was so completely taken aback and at a loss for an answer that she hastily pitched upon one careless word in his sentence to join issue upon.



‘How many times must I tell you that Mr. Randolph is *not* a Yankee?’

‘I don’t care what he is,’ said Staples, with a mulish and morose expression. ‘I only know I wish he’d stayed on the Gulf Coast!’

‘I am sure he might just as well; and I don’t think it would matter very much if *you* were there too!’ she retorted, suddenly and unreasonably cross; though the next moment, ashamed of her causeless petulance, she turned it off into a laugh, and professed she had only been in fun.

The ‘galled jade’ must wince; and to the most amiable of women it is galling to be suspected of a flirtation or special understanding with a man who behaves to her only as a friend and comrade, while she is only too conscious that the warmer feeling is on her side. To be supposed to be enjoying that special atten-



tion of which you yearn in vain to be the object, is to enter vividly then, if never before, into the feelings of Tantalus. The very supposition presents the tempting cup so near to the lips, which yet it does not touch !

Unreasonable, however, it was to be angry with poor Staples for presenting to her as a probability in *his* mind that which was only a faint, far, dream-like possibility—she dared not admit it to be even a hope—in hers. She could not but see that the provocation was entirely unconscious and unintentional ; she felt that she had administered a moral slap in the face to Staples on entirely insufficient grounds, and endeavoured to make the *amende* by laughing the matter off, and by joining him in his walk as far as the spot which was to be the scene of his achievements in rail-splitting and fence-making ; she even lingered sociably with him until he had got his tools about, and then took



her leave, with a smiling remark that she would not stay to interfere with his work.

If she had known that Max Randolph's eye had been on her as she talked with Staples by the gate, and walked with him towards the fence, Staples might have gone to his work alone, and borne his wounded feelings with him unsoothed. As it was, Max Randolph enjoyed another taste of the sensation of being left to himself and to the not very congenial companionship of Chadwick and Conyers; while Rosemary bestowed her society with orthodox exclusiveness upon her legitimately plighted lover, and Violet devoted herself to the conscientious office of mending the breach her pettish words had made in Staples' feelings.



## CHAPTER XXIX.

‘OUR THREE DAYS’ LOVE LIES SLAIN.’

So the day wore away ; and if Violet felt vaguely that her sky had clouded over since yesterday, Staples was quite of the same mind. Her smiles might tend to the soothing of his ruffled feelings, but could not restore his content of heart, nor remove the sullen and suspicious sense of jealous dissatisfaction which had taken possession of him when he saw her face light up with that radiant look of welcome at the sight of Max Randolph.

And this latter, on his part, though Staples had not the comfort of knowing it, was reaping even as he sowed, finding himself second where



he had been first. Even the pleasant impression of Violet's warm welcome and evident gladness at his return yesterday was marred by her walking off *tête-à-tête* with Staples to-day.

In the evening, Violet had a long letter to write home, or rather to her relatives in New York ; and as it was not easy to write fluently in the parlour with the babble of voices on the piazza outside sounding clear through the open window, to say nothing of the momentary probability of an inroad of some of the party on music bent, she always transacted her correspondence in her own room upstairs.

This evening her pen did not run over the paper as swiftly as it usually did. Every now and then she found her mind wandering from her letter—turning, as the needle to the pole, to one of whom she thought a great deal more than was good for her. She wondered



what were his feelings on finding Rosemary engaged to Tregelva. His chronic reserve under apparent frankness, that ironical levity which might cover depths or shallows, left her here a wide field for conjecture. She did not think of attributing to him any curiosity with regard to herself and Staples. She knew only too well how much she thought and speculated about Max ; but it did not occur to her that he might return the compliment in kind.

Her wandering thoughts distracted her a good deal from her letter, but it was finished at last. She wanted to enclose a cutting from a Florida newspaper for her grandfather’s perusal. When she looked for the paper she found it was not in her room ; then she remembered that Mr. Whitworth had had it, and that she had seen it that afternoon on the table in his study. She ran downstairs to fetch it. The study door was partly open ;



it was, indeed, an uncommon occurrence for the Whitworths to shut a door. There was no lamp there, so the room was dark, except for the pale, broad bar of moonlight which lay across the floor, faint and dimly white, only a shadow of the usual effulgence of Southern moonshine, as the night was overcast with grey and sombre clouds, through which the pallid silver gleam of the moon could only now and then struggle out.

Violet crossed the room cautiously, in fear of stumbling over a footstool or a chair, and began groping over the table in the deep patch of shadow between the windows, on which she remembered seeing the newspaper she wanted.

While she was feeling for it among the scattered books that lay there disorderly, she heard a well-known voice—a trifle lowered and deepened from its ordinary tone, never stentorian at its loudest—say, with a sort of tender brusqueness,



‘Well, just for one last time, Rosemary?’

She turned with a shrinking start, and cast a glance out of the window through which the voice had come to her ear. The study was at the back of the house; she had supposed all the household to be gathered together, as usual, on the south piazza, or in the parlour. But here, in the pale dusk of the shadowed east piazza, outside the study windows, she saw, as she made an involuntary step towards them, the two familiar figures whose very shadows *her* eyes could have recognised even without the clue of a name or a voice.

In the darkness of the room *she* stood unseen; her foot was light, her dress of some soft clinging material, so that no creak of step nor rustle of silk had revealed her presence to disturb the pair outside the window. They were standing close, close together; their two forms cast but one shadow as Max Randolph’s



arm slid round Rosemary's waist and drew her to his side.

Did she raise her face to his? No : it was his hand that caressed her hair and upturned her face to meet his kiss ; but she yielded unresistingly, and even willingly, to the caress.

Violet looked but for a moment—one instinctive, almost involuntary, glance—and drew back as if some unseen hand had struck her a blow. Mingled with the quick shrinking of dismay at discovering herself looking, if only for a moment, on what she was not meant to see—hearing, if only by accident, words she was not meant to hear—was an unreasonable dart of sharp and stinging pain.

She seized the newspaper which she had come to fetch, and hurried upstairs, back to her room. She threw the paper down, and by a sudden unreasoning impulse pressed her hand over her eyes, as if she could shut out, blot out,



the scene already so vividly imaged there. Yet still she saw the picture grow out of the darkness, of Max Randolph holding Rosemary in his arms, to his heart, kissing Rosemary’s lips, her face, so white and lovely in the pale moonlight, upturned to his.

Oh, rash, reckless Rosemary! What if it had been Tregelva, instead of Violet, whom a malicious fate led that way? Might not then the ancestral home of the Tregelvas have melted away like a mirage from out of your fair prospects? your future, like fairy gold, have turned to withered leaves in your hand?

Tregelva would have had a right to be astonished at that *tableau* on the east piazza if it had been presented to *his* eyes; but Violet, having known Rosemary—known her through and through for so many years of close intimacy—had no such right. It was not reasonable that *she* should feel surprise; and certainly



she ought to have had more sense than to have winced under the sight of Rosemary's vouchsafing a farewell kiss to a former lover.

Perhaps, however, it was less that Rosemary should have *given*, than that he should have *taken*, that parting kiss! But however it might be, Violet had certainly neither right nor reason to take the matter so deeply to heart. She ought to have remembered how placidly Rosemary had accepted *her* confidence concerning the night that Max had kissed *her* on their way home from the forest-fire.

She did not just now remember that, nor anything else, indeed, except that the sight had hurt her—hurt her like a stab.

She had thought, hoped, it was all over between Max and Rosemary; and *now*! Blinded by feeling, her emotions rising and overflowing and drowning her intelligence—as, with her temperament, mere emotional impulses are so



apt to do—that kiss assumed to her the form of convincing evidence that all was *not* over, that Rosemary held his heart still fast in the hollow of that firm white hand, which, as Violet knew well, no outer influences could move to unloose its grip. This was, of course, possible, and, indeed, a not unnatural interpretation of the scene. On the other hand, it was equally possible and natural that that kiss might have been indeed in farewell—a mere tribute to the memory of a past romance—

Where, crushed by three days’ pressure,  
A three days’ love lies slain!

while Rosemary, for her part, might argue that her engagement to Tregelva precluded misunderstanding or misinterpretation, and that she might safely grant one token of gentle remembrance of a vanished dream—drop one flower on the coffin before they closed the grave in a final farewell.



Yet, although she belonged to that class of temperament in which the feelings run away with the judgment, the heart with the head, Violet still had sense enough to perceive, as soon as the first shock of tingling pain was over, that she was making too much of this episode, although she did not realise what a molehill it was that she was allowing to cast the shadow of a mountain over her. She felt bitterly ashamed of herself that she had, even by chance and for a moment, played the part of eavesdropper, and blushed even in the solitude of her room as she wondered—how *could* she tell Rosemary of what she had overheard and seen !

Presently she heard Tregelva's step cross the corridor from his room and descend the stairs. In a wooden and scantily carpeted house, all footsteps, especially masculine ones, are audible, not to say noisy ; and Violet



and Rosemary knew every man’s step in the house without needing a voice to guide their recognition. Violet wondered, would Tregelva break in, as she had done, upon a touching crisis? She thought not.

Rosemary was too wide awake to run such a risk, and had probably assured herself of Tregelva’s being safely upstairs before she ventured upon giving tryst to Max Randolph.

When Violet went downstairs she found the house party, as usual, assembled on the south piazza—so much as usual that it almost seemed to her as if that meeting on the east piazza must have been a dream. For there sat Rosemary by Tregelva’s side, listening with the sweetest and brightest responsiveness to a tale of Ascot, the year that Lord George Bellasys rode *Cœur d’Acier*. There, on one side of the entrance doorway, was Chadwick making himself agreeable to Mrs. Whitworth, and on the



other Mr. Whitworth holding forth on the subject of the Sarasota land-frauds to Randolph and Conyers, who were as good listeners as two waxen dummies would have proved—Max being evidently in the mood laconic, at least as far as his male friends were concerned, while Conyers' usual taciturnity was enhanced by chronic despondency, arising partly from nostalgia, partly from an empty purse, and perhaps partly from the thought of the unattainability of his far-off girl—as nobody knew her name, they all habitually spoke of the unknown object of his devotion as 'Conyers' girl.'

Staples was seated lowly and apart on the steps, his back unsociably turned to the rest of the company.

Violet took a chair on Mrs. Whitworth's side of the piazza, but a little apart from that lady, who was busy giving Chadwick good



advice. A vacant seat was on Violet’s other hand; and before very long Max Randolph steered his course towards this.

‘May I sit here?’ he asked, with that air of deference which seldom failed to please women in general and Violet in particular.

‘If you like,’ she replied with nonchalance.

‘I do like,’ he said, availing himself of her permission. ‘You are one of the women whose presence is restful—there’s a sort of soothing magnetism about you, Miss Violet,’ he continued, reposing his head comfortably against the back of the chair. ‘Woman’s influence’—he pursued his subject at leisure—‘is of two qualities—the opposite poles——’

‘And mine is the negative,’ she interposed, ‘the soporific influence. Thank you! I trust I may act as a satisfactory opiate.’

There was a distinct vein of tartness in her tone, which surprised and rather puzzled Max.



It was really the first time that he had ever known Violet captiously ready to take offence, or her sweet temper ruffled by ever so slight a breeze of petulance.

‘You seem to think it’s a poor compliment to say that yours is an atmosphere of peace,’ he said. ‘I speak as I find. I have always found it so—but perhaps you would prefer an atmosphere of storm?’

‘It would at least, I should think, be an agreeable change,’ she replied, still with a little touch of asperity.

‘We have never quarrelled, have we?’ he said musingly.

‘It is never too late to mend,’ she rejoined, the natural ease and playfulness returning to her manner, for it was most unnatural, and indeed impossible, for her to be vexed with him for long; ‘and perhaps it would break the monotony if we did.’



‘Do you think it wants breaking?’ he asked.

‘Some people tire of tranquil seas and sunny skies,’ she said.

‘Some people—yes,’ he replied, with an expression of superiority to those misguided mortals. ‘Are you tired of the monotony of our peace, Miss Violet?’

‘No; I like peace—I am not tired of it.’

‘Ner of me?’ he inquired, bending a little nearer to her.

‘No,’ she said, with a sweet glance of gentle coquetry—sweeter than usual to make amends for her late asperity. ‘Not quite yet.’

‘I don’t bore you?’ he continued.

‘If it won’t make you too vain, I will own that you don’t.’ She spoke buoyantly, but her heart was heavy; in her mind’s eye she still saw those two figures clasped together in the shadowed moonlight on the east piazza.



Yet she felt she must be bright and pleasant with Max; he must never, never dream that she had seen them; he must not think that word or mood of *his* could cloud her spirits or ruffle her tranquillity.

‘Always glad to see me, aren’t you?’ he said, in that half-sardonic tone which was open to the interpretation that he meant the very reverse of what he said.

‘When you’re nice,’ she replied, smiling, but shrinking back into herself with a sensitive feeling of reserve.

‘I was “nice” yesterday then?’ he rejoined. ‘You were glad to see me yesterday, though I am not quite so sure about to-day!’

‘One can’t *go on* singing “O Jubilate!”’ she said lightly, adding with playful magniloquence, ‘I deem it fitting to restrain the ebullitions of my joy and keep it bridled within bounds.’



‘It must be a hard task,’ he observed drily.

And they touched no further that evening on such delicate ground as their mutual and personal feelings and relations.

Violet recoiled with a sensitive shrinking from any nearer approach to sentiment or personality—guided the conversation to more general matters. His allusion to her gladness at his return had made her wince. Had ~~she~~ betrayed it *too* openly? she wondered. Had she been in error in deeming that in her very frankness lay her best safety from detection?

It did not occur to her that if she had unwittingly betrayed her real feelings for him that was the last allusion Max Randolph would have made.

Knowing him so little, beneath the surface, as she did, with all their long and friendly familiarity, she wondered whether he could



have guessed whether her little feminine screens and ruses might not prove flimsy as spider's web and transparent as glass, to his keen, subtle, piercing eyes? What if those eyes could look into her very heart, and read it through and through? She did not fear his despising her; she knew him, by instinct rather than by discrimination or study of character, just well enough for that. But the idea had flashed into her mind as a question, when he spoke of her yesterday's gladness of greeting—was it possible that he guessed her weakness? was he, to distract his mind from dwelling on Rosemary, diverting himself by playing with her feelings? She thrust the idea away from her, refused to dwell on it or harbour it, banished it with shuddering recoil and anger; but it had passed through her mind and left its trace.



## CHAPTER XXX.

NO !

THE next morning, Rosemary suggested that it was time they should begin to pack, or at least to clear out their trunks and set their wardrobes in order, ready for packing. Violet agreed; but when she set to work at her Saratoga trunk, she felt the occupation about as cheerful as the driving of nails into her own coffin. She had not the slightest dream of any possible good to be gained by staying on at West Grove House; and yet she felt a deep-rooted reluctance to leave it, an altogether unreasonable reluctance, considering the nightly visitation of the mosquitoes, and the



daily plague of flies and swarms of gnats, and the fierce heat and blaze of the tropical sun. In spite of all these drawbacks, although the season had come when all who could fly were flying from Florida, Violet could not bear the thought of leaving West Grove House, where she had spent a season on the whole so happy, marred by only one unpleasant episode. She hated that sense of parting, severance, general breaking-up, which now began to pervade the atmosphere. She felt as if this was an end, a crisis, a closing of one volume of life and opening of another, and she did not like the feeling.

Rosemary, on the other hand, was in high spirits. *Her* plans and prospects were completely changed, and all for the better, by her engagement to Tregelva. Instead of being left, for her sins, to mourn in sackcloth and ashes in the dreary exile of Pine Ridge for all the



weary summer long, she was only to stay there for a short time, to talk over her engagement and her plans matrimonial, which had, of course, already been imparted by letter to her family circle. And Tregelva was going to Pine Ridge on a visit, to be presented to his future parents-in-law. After an undetermined period devoted to filial duties—a period which, however, Rosemary had made up her mind should not be very long—she was to go north, join the Prestons for the voyage across the Atlantic, and spend the summer with Violet in London. Oh, joyful prospect ! Theatres, operas, balls, soirées, and fêtes, danced before Rosemary's eyes in brilliant kaleidoscopic confusion. If the Tregelvas came to town for the season, there and then she was to be introduced to her future family ; if not, she was to visit them in Cornwall.

It was proposed that, now that Rosemary



was 'homeward bound' as well as Violet, the two girls should make the whole journey together; therefore, that Violet should accompany Rosemary on her visit to Pine Ridge, and thence travel to New York with her to join the Prestons, who would await them there for the voyage.

At the hour when the mail was due the girls left their packing and went downstairs; it was a regular habit at West Grove House for all the inmates to foregather at the mail hour, except, indeed, Mr. and Mrs. Whitworth—the busy bees of the hive—who had, in their different departments—the out-of-doors and the in-doors—too much to attend to in the precious morning hours to waste their time lounging on the piazza and waiting for the mail. This day Chadwick had gone to fetch it. In these declining days of a diminished party he did not take the big bag, but brought



the mail in his breast-pocket. He announced on his return that it was only a light one—half a dozen letters. He gave Violet and Rosemary a newspaper apiece on the piazza, and passed on into the smoking-room, where the rest of the young men, as usual, congregated for the social distribution of the morning's mail.

While the girls were unfolding their newspapers and looking for marked passages therein—scored by obliging friends to save them the trouble of reading the papers through—they became conscious of a little stir of excitement inside the smoking-room, and caught snatches of the vigorous and original expletives in Staples' voice, which denoted warm interest on his part. He was gifted with great facility for new and ingenious combinations of irreverent expressions whereby to give vent to his feelings when moved; and evidently something had moved



him now. Tregelva's equable voice was heard to observe—

‘“It's an ill-wind that blows nobody good.”’

Then came Conyers' terse comment—

‘Wonder they didn't cable!’

And Tregelva's answering remark—

‘No; it's only *ill*-news that flies fast.’

‘What's up in there, I wonder?’ said Violet *sotto voce*.

‘Apparently Staples is the hero of the occasion,’ said Rosemary, turning her head towards the smoking-room window, with more interest than she generally manifested in Archibald St. Julian, who was just then heard to respond to some observation with a touch of disapprobation in his tone—

‘You don't suppose I'm glad the poor little beggars are dead? They were jolly little fellows.’



Then, in a few moments, they heard his footsteps across the hall and up the stairs ; and Tregelva, who loved a piece of news as much as a woman, came out on the piazza, full of his report.

‘ Here’s old Staples gone up into the peerage at a bound ! He’s got a lawyer’s letter telling him his two cousins have died of diphtheria within a day of each other, poor little chaps ! It appears it broke out in the school, and these two boys were the first to go off. So he’s the Earl of Kilvastone to-day.’

The Earl of Kilvastone did not appear inclined to flaunt his new honours in the face of the company ; he did not make his appearance downstairs again until the midday dinner-time, and then came to the table with that air of reserve which always produced on his countenance the effect of a sulky, not to say morose, expression ; although, to do him



justice, his looks really belied his temper. He was evidently not in a mood to be congratulated, nor inclined to enter into conversation on the matter of the important news; and everyone had sufficient tact and delicacy to respect his reserve. But if the subject of his accession to the earldom was discreetly let alone before his face, discussion thereon—especially in the smoking-room—ran rife behind his back; various possible future results and developments being significantly touched upon, although prudence restrained his friends from entering upon them fully in the semi-publicity of this resort. And Max Randolph heard it all, took it all in, without exhibiting any particular interest in the matter. Tregelva, with amiable consideration for Randolph's presumed ignorance of the laws and regulations of inheritance of titles and estates, treated him to a little dissertation on these subjects, and related the



twice-told tale of Staples having been always regarded, and brought up to regard himself, as the heir of his uncle the old earl, until, late in life, the latter married, leaving at his death, a few years afterwards, two sons—the little earl and his young brother—through whose sudden deaths Staples now inherited.

The afternoon wore away, and Staples came out of his shell a little—a very little way—being evidently ready and prepared to retire into it again on the smallest provocation. His joining the social party on the piazza before supper was reasonably ‘taken as a sign’ that he was beginning to get accustomed to his new position. ‘He bore his honours meekly’—rather reluctantly than complacently; manifesting a disposition to shy away from allusions to his aggrandisement, and responding the first time he was addressed as ‘Lord Kilvastone,’ by a deprecating and almost discomfited—



‘ Oh, come—I say now ! ’

Staples had been pronounced by phrenologists to possess, amongst other good moral organs, a fine bump of conscientiousness ; and the development of this sometimes inconvenient organ made him feel it so revolting to admit even to himself that he could rejoice at the deaths of two unoffending children, whom he had rather liked than not, that he hardened himself in an attitude of stubborn resistance to the bright hopes and dreams and ambitions which came knocking at his door in throngs. Only to Violet, finding himself with her, apart from the rest, for a few pleasant moments, he unburdened his mind by a few confidential words.

‘ This is a regular turning upside down, a sort of a transformation scene, for me. I never dreamt of such a thing. I thought the boys ’ud grow up and have half a dozen sons apiece.



They were fine little fellows, especially the eldest—young Fergus. Gives one a kind of a creepy feeling to think of both those boys being dead and gone, all in a day ! ’

Violet was sweet and sympathetic ; and although she said but little, words were not needed. Staples’ instincts were as quick as his learning was limited—which is saying a good deal ; and he felt that she understood him. He hated to express himself, yet secretly yearned to be understood ; and the sense that Violet comprehended his feelings was eminently soothing and satisfactory. Rosemary also regarded him more amicably, made herself more agreeable to him, than was her wont. She loved herself best in the world ; but next to herself she loved Violet. She had always a ready eye for the main chance, on Violet’s behalf as well as her own ; and she perceived with surprise, and vexed impatience at Vi’s unworldliness, and



yet with a faint glimmer of reluctantly admiring tenderness for it too, that Violet's thoughts, hopes, and dreams were absorbed and centred in Max Randolph ; she was thinking so much of him that her preoccupied mind was not free to contemplate the possibilities which Rosemary's cool, and for once unselfishly sanguine, eyes saw unfolding from this day's news.

It might have been better if the girls had talked over the position of things fully and freely at this time, with their habitual plain confidential speaking ; but they happened to be very little alone this day, as they found the general company, with its particular component parts, too interesting at the present juncture for them to spend any more time in the seclusion of their own room than the cares of the toilet necessitated. There was always plenty of time to talk at night, they knew ; and saw no reason to expend upon any exhaustive private conver-



sations during the day the time which they might more profitably bestow on the society of their fellow-creatures.

Supper-time arrived and passed ; and in the evening the betrothed pair made a little innovation on the time-honoured institution of the social piazza lounge, by setting off for a moonlight ramble through the wood. Max suggested to Violet that this was a good example to follow, and she was nothing loth. The two pairs, it need hardly be said, did not join forces, but strolled apart—discreetly far apart, out of sight of each other. The affianced couple talked of their own personal affairs, and played characteristic variations on the old, old tune ; the non-affianced couple bestowed their attention, at least at first, on topics more general and less personal. They looked at the stars, and at the halo round the moon, and made astronomical and meteorological re-



marks; then came down to mundane things—talked of the approaching northward migration, of the probabilities of Chadwick's people sending him money to go home, of the hard case of poor Conyers, left in pledge.

‘Wonder if his girl will get tired of waiting for him,’ said Max.

‘Let us hope she thinks he's worth waiting for,’ observed Violet.

‘No accounting for tastes, is there?’ he rejoined.

‘Fortunately. There's someone to please every taste—someone to admire every style,’ she said.

He laughed.

‘That's rather too optimistic a view, even for you, who always look on the best side. You haven't Rosemary's fine faculty of finding out the worm in the bud.’

Max never could keep off the subject of Rosemary for long. If his conversation were



a guide to his thoughts, they turned towards Rosemary, as the magnetic needle to the north; and this was not lost upon Violet.

‘There’s Tregelva thinks himself a lucky fellow,’ Max presently observed.

‘He *is* fortunate,’ Violet averred staunchly.

‘You are loyal,’ he said. ‘You’re a good friend, Miss Violet. I am glad to have had your friendship.’

He drew her hand through his arm, and they walked on for a few steps in silence; then he said meditatively:

‘We have been good friends always, haven’t we?’

‘Yes,’ she answered gently, ‘always.’

‘I hope,’ he replied, ‘we always shall be.’

There was another silence—a longer one; it was he who broke it.

‘Seems as if there was something in the air to-night—something’—he hesitated before he added with a half laugh—‘catching!’



‘Catching! Not fever, I hope,’ she responded lightly.

‘Fever? Well, I don’t know what some people would call it.’

He paused again, and then resumed somewhat abruptly—

‘The time’s running short now—if there’s anything one has to say, why not say it at once? We have always been good friends: why should we not be something more than friends? Violet, what would you say if—if I were to ask you to be my wife?’

Her heart gave a wildly startled leap, as a thrill shot through her whole being of mingled pain and delight. If she had been assured of his love for her it would have a throb of pure joy. But the fear, rather than the wish, was father to the thought with her. Her fear that his love was Rosemary’s still was strengthened almost to conviction by that interview between



them, of which she had been an involuntary witness the night before.

Had it not been for this persuasion—for the flash of apprehension that he merely turned to her in pique, in the rebound of wounded pride, perhaps even in the knowledge of her feelings for him—had she only regarded the possibility of his loving her as something more than a dream, too shadowy and visionary to be a hope, what words could have seemed sweeter, better chosen, than those he uttered,—‘Be my wife!’

All the sense of the tenderness and sacredness of union would have swelled her heart with rapture, could she but have felt that he asked her to be his wife for love’s sake alone! But as it was, the keen quiver of doubt and hope which thrilled her at those words was sharpened by the stinging sense of the omission of a word sweeter still.



Why had he not said, 'Violet, I love you'? In her morbidly sensitive mood, that omission seemed marked, intentional. Had he but said those words—had his tone conveyed their truth—how all the world would have been transfigured to her!

As it was, all the doubts, the fears, the passion of jealous persuasion that it was Rosemary whom he loved—the shrinking dread of wounded maiden pride, that he might have guessed her secret and made this offer in honourable kindness on that account—all weighed cold and heavy on her heart, and stifled the responsive impulse of love and joy that first leapt and thrilled in answer to his words, and froze her tone as she replied—

'Why do you ask me that?'

He retorted by another question.

'Why does a man generally ask a woman to marry him? Do you think you could be happy with me, Violet?'



Still that fatal bitterness of jealous suspicion and fear of having betrayed herself possessed her ; and on the impulse of that strange and mad perversity which springs from such conflict of feeling in a woman's heart, she answered—

‘No !’

‘You are frank at least,’ he said, with an accent of reluctant and half-resentful appreciation ; ‘there is no shilly-shallying with you—now !’ If there was a significance in this last emphasised syllable, she failed to understand it aright.

‘Well,’ he continued, ‘I hope you will be happy with the man of your choice—happy as I, no doubt, should have failed to make you !’ There was a perceptible trace of bitterness in his tone ; and if he had only stopped on those words, the interview might have taken a very different turn, but he unluckily went on to say—



‘No doubt your answer is wise and right ; you have decided for the best.’

‘For both of us, no doubt,’ she rejoined quickly.

‘Yes ; I do not question your wisdom in judging for us both.’

‘Why, then—why did you ask me—*that*—if you thought it would be wisest—best—for both—for me to answer, so?’ she asked brokenly, as her breath came short, but fighting valiantly, and successfully, to preserve her equanimity of tone, so that no betraying ring of passion led him to suspect her real feelings.

‘Because I was a fool,’ he said brusquely. ‘Let us forget my folly. But first, Violet, see : tell me one thing. Would you have answered my question differently if I had asked you—last night?’

She started at the words.

Only one interpretation of this question



occurred to her. He was cognisant of her having witnessed his parting interview with Rosemary !

He thought her jealous. Perhaps his idea might be to solace his hurt pride for the failure of his advances to Rosemary, by wooing where he deemed himself so sure of acceptance !

The truth always naturally sprang to Violet's lips. A truth, or part of a truth, may sometimes chance to mislead as dangerously as a lie ; but Violet never dreamt that she might be misleading him when she answered, truly, to his question whether she would have given him a different answer had his proposal been made a day earlier—

‘I—I might !’

‘You are true in this at least,’ he said, with the same hint of reluctant admiration and yet resentment in his tone.

‘In what have I been untrue ? How have



I ever deceived you?' she asked, lifting her head.

'I deceived myself! If I thought I had found in you something purer, truer, less worldly than other women—something above their paltry, shallow, unworthy pride—it was I who deceived myself. You are like the rest!' he said, with a sort of lofty scorn—as of a thing too frail for blame or wrath.

Violet made no answer: to utter even a word would, indeed, have been a physical impossibility to her at that moment. A sudden rush of burning tears, a choking sob swelling in her throat, held her dumb.

If it had been daylight he must have seen the passion of emotion that shook her at his words. The scorn in his accents struck her like a lash. Under the bitter blow of his misapprehension she shrank and writhed as if a cruel scourge had fallen on her bare nerves.



Her mouth was quivering, her breast heaving with the stifled sob.

If he could only have seen ! But the shadows of the wood were deep, and the moon—

Oh cold pale moon ! thou cruel pale moon,  
That night hadst never the grace—

to send a revealing ray on her pale and agitated features. He interpreted her silence to mean that she pleaded guilty to the worldly motives he was attributing to her.

‘Well, I suppose it’s good-bye between us,’ he said. ‘I shall leave West Grove House to-morrow. Probably our lines in the future will lie far apart ; and while I remain here, I need not assure you that you need be under no apprehension of any repetition of the mistake I have made to-night.’

Still Violet was incapable of making any answer. Her head was bent down, her face in



shadow, convulsed with tears. Her heart seemed bursting with the rising sobs which half-suffocated her as she struggled with all the power of her will to keep them back. If she uttered but one word she knew it must mean an ignominious breakdown.

Whatever interpretation he placed upon her continued silence, it was certainly far off, hopelessly out of sight, from the true one. He walked on by her side, in silence too—haughty and offended silence it was on his part; while she strove for self-mastery, yet felt that if he spoke again she must answer, and *if* she were forced to speak, the sob would refuse to be any longer controlled. She could not bear the shame of breaking into tears before him. If she could only get away—away from him! Then she heard with dismay the voices of Chadwick and Conyers approaching through the trees. She could not, could not, meet them



now and join in conversation. It was impossible !

An idea shot into her mind on the impulse of the moment. She knew they must now be close to a narrow track which branched off through the wood, and led by a short-cut across the grove to the house. Yes, there was the little path—a just dimly perceptible opening in the bush. She would fall behind for a moment, and turn quickly down this track, regardless of appearances, and get away, fly from him, hide herself away !

She carried out this idea, but of course did not succeed in doing so unobserved. He looked round as she lingered behind him, saw her movement, and naturally argued that she would not make a dart down a side-path barely wide enough for one if she desired his company. Yet he scrupled at allowing her to pass through the grove alone without at



least offering his escort. He made a step after her.

‘You wish to return home? Shall I accompany you?’ he said with more formal courtesy than he had ever before used to her.

She managed to command her voice sufficiently to articulate just one syllable—

‘No.’

And the stifled tone of pain he mistook for resentment.

‘As you wish,’ he said stiffly, and let her pass on her hurried way. If he were aggrieved and offended, he considered, however, that he had no right to be surprised. Women were unreasonable, and took miffs and fancies, and Violet was merely turning out like the rest. Like many of his sex, he started from the assumption that women were unreasonable, and went on the simple principle of setting



down anything he did not understand in them to this deficiency of the sex.

Meanwhile Violet reached the house and got to her room in safety and unnoticed, and there she threw herself down on her bed, and the tears and sobs had their way ; there Rosemary presently found her, with her aching and dishevelled head buried in the pillows, her eyes

Near washed away with weeping !

‘ What a nuisance that man is ! ’ said Rosemary, instantly hitting the right nail on the head.

‘ He’s always upsetting you ! What’s he been doing now ? ’

‘ It—it wasn’t his fault,’ replied Violet, half sobbing still. ‘ It—it was all mine ! ’

‘ What have you been up to then ? ’ asked Rosemary, brusquely but not unsympathetically. ‘ Come, come, my Vi, sit up and tell me all about it. Why, my poor darling, your eyes



are like boiled gooseberries ! There, don't cry any more : tell me what's wrong !' and she rested Violet's throbbing head on her shoulder and smoothed the ruffled hair caressingly, and Violet told her tale. She knew that she and Max had, somehow, mutually misunderstood each other at the very time when their understanding should have been one of the best, and clashed in discord where they should have been most in harmony ; but she did not at all comprehend the misconception on his side. As a soldier in the thick of the fight cannot see the battle for the smoke, Violet could not see, through the thick fog of misinterpretation in which she felt lost, how it was things had fallen out so untowardly.

She was conscious that she had been to blame, yet could not see how far they might both have gone astray—how he as well as she might have been misled.



But Rosemary's quicker intelligence, self-possessed and clear, leapt on to the track at once.

'Of course he set to abusing women,' she said consolingly; 'men always do if anything goes crossways with them. Don't worry yourself about that. It's very likely he may have some idea in his head about Staples.'

'Staples?' echoed Violet, lifting her pale, tearful face in puzzled surprise.

'Oh, Vi! you *are* too soft a little goose for this world. Do open your shortsighted eyes and see that the Earl of Kilvastone is a better match than Staples would have been—that of course Max knows that—that last night the news had not arrived, and that Max, as well as the rest of the world, can see that you've a very good chance of being Countess of Kilvastone, if you'd only play your cards well!'



‘Do you think *that* could have been what he meant?’ exclaimed Violet. ‘But, Rose, I care more for him than for all the Earls in the United Kingdom!’

‘Then why did you say “No” to him, you little donkey?’ Rosemary justly retorted. ‘There, don’t look like Niobe, all tears; you’ve cried enough to make yourself ill; and really there’s nothing to take on so desperately about; there’s no harm done that can’t be undone. Manage another interview, and make him speak again, and *then* have your wits about you!’

But Violet shook her head despondingly—

‘I feel as if it was all, all over. I *feel* it *here*,’ she pressed her hand upon her heart. ‘He is gone from me—gone—and gone in anger!’



## CHAPTER XXXI.

## HAND TO HAND.

WHEN the household assembled the next morning at the breakfast-table, Violet, in spite of an almost sleepless night, managed by dint of lavish bathing of her tear-stained eyes, and that control of feature and expression which seldom—except in such crises as that of the previous evening—fails any true daughter of Eve, to present much her usual appearance. As to Max Randolph, he, of course, looked quite as usual, and seemed to have an excellent appetite for his breakfast ; it might have been her imagination that his ‘ Good-morning, Mis Violet ! ’ had a shade more formality in it than



his habitual tone to her. Mr. Whitworth, who seldom came in time for the beginning of a meal, entered in the middle of the breakfast, with an air of bustling interest, and evidently a budget of news to unfold.

‘I suppose you girls don’t generally go far afield without escort?’ he began with an air of significant jocularly. ‘Because I wouldn’t go wandering about far beyond the grounds to-day, alone, if I were you. John Ross has just been in, and brought the news that there have been fine doings down at Giralda. It appears there was a row outside the bar, and the sheriff rode up, and a drunken nigger shot at him and wounded him badly. That made the citizens mad; and they just rose up in a body, and went through Nigger-town and ran out the niggers. It was a regular slum, you know—that “Black Quarter” of Giralda. Well, Ross says they’ve been



through it pretty thoroughly—raided all the worst houses and run the black fellows out, and gave them a broad hint not to show their faces there again; and so they got on the train for Osceola. But the Giralda people telegraphed to Osceola that all their riff-raff were on the way; and when the train reached Osceola, the citizens all turned out armed to meet it, and wouldn't let a man get off. Ross says they were all along the platform with their revolvers out, and drove back every darkey who tried to step out of the cars. So some of the black fellows came on to Fair Springs and some got off at Altaville; and although I dare say they've had a sharp lesson, we'd better be on the look-out for tramps the next day or two, and these girls may as well not go on long solitary prowls.'

'We are not much given to solitary



prowling,' remarked Rosemary, with a gentle smile.

'There's an energetic way about these Florida fellows that one can't help admiring,' observed Tregelva musingly as he carefully peeled an orange in Cuban fashion, 'the Giralda citizens making a clean sweep of their black sheep! and the Osceola men meeting the train and driving them back with loaded revolvers!'

'What they call here "doing a very slick business," suggested Staples, or, to give him his now rightful title, Lord Kilvastone.

'Wish we had as "slick" a way of dealing with our objectionable characters in the Old World!' said Tregelva.

'After all, it's only passing them on to our neighbours,' said Violet. 'We used to do the same thing, on a bigger scale, when we shipped off our convicts to the colonies!'



‘Scarcely fair to one’s neighbours,’ remarked Max Randolph; ‘every city ought to be able to deal with its own!’

‘Best thing to do’s to shut ’em up,’ said Conyers, with his accustomed decisive practicality.

‘I am going to ride over to Altaville this morning,’ said Randolph presently. ‘I’m northward-bound, and have to take my leave by this evening’s train.’

‘Why! so soon?’ exclaimed Mrs. Whitworth regretfully, while Violet devoted herself assiduously to an artistic arrangement of orange-peel on her plate, intended to represent a flower. ‘Can’t you stay till the rest go, and make a social move of it, and go north all together?’

‘That would be delightful,’ he replied; ‘but, unfortunately for me, I must move on immediately. I have a little business to do at Alta-



ville—to fetch a valise I left there. I hope I shall be able to get back to dinner—and enjoy a last social meal at your hospitable board.’

‘Well, I’m sorry you have to go so soon,’ the hostess said sincerely. ‘We’ll have dinner a little late, so as to give you time.’

Max glanced at Violet; she was looking down, apparently absorbed in her orange-peel, which had assumed a very fair resemblance to a rose; she was putting a few finishing touches to it with admiring care. She knew that he was looking at her, but felt that she could not look up and meet his glance before all the table, lest under his eyes her cheek should pale or flush. So she did not raise her head nor put a word into the conversation, although every word of his, so easily and carelessly spoken, had fallen like the stroke of a hammer upon her heart.

She did not look at Rosemary as they all



left the room after breakfast ; indeed, she rather avoided looking at her. But Rosemary needed no glance nor word from Violet as intimation of her feelings. She understood perfectly well ; and on her friend's behalf she proceeded to take observations in the courtyard, and imparted the results to Violet promptly.

‘The horse isn't saddled yet, Vi,’ she said, in a confidential and meaning undertone. ‘If you want to manage a talk with him now, you can catch him for a few minutes before he starts.’

Rosemary, indeed, might, and probably would, have managed this ; but such management was unluckily quite out of Violet's power. She had neither the daring to make an open call and claim upon his attention, nor the ingenuity to frame some delicate device whereby to attract him apart from the others. He gave her no opportunity of a word aside with him,



and she was too straightforward for the *finesse*, too sensitive for the enterprise, which would have helped her to create her own opportunity under the public eye.

He stayed for a little time smoking on the piazza and talking to the other young men ; and how could she walk up to him before the faces of Conyers and Chadwick, Tregelva, and —worst of all—Staples, and draw him apart from them ? Presently he sauntered across the hall, and lingered there for a parting chat with Mr. and Mrs. Whitworth, and they accompanied him to the courtyard, where by this time the horse stood saddled and ready, with old Lorenzo at its head.

Violet followed them. The Whitworths were talking loud and cheerfully in their hearty way, Max Randolph responding in his pleasantest vein. Whilst he was feeding the horse with a carrot—‘to put him in a good temper,’



as he observed—the Whitworths' attention was attracted to the buggy, which was standing under a tree hard by, and which certainly stood in sore need of cleaning ; and they turned to administer a course of mild and reasonable rebuke—such as is judicious in a region where 'help' is difficult to get and hard to keep—to Lorenzo for neglect of his duties. Whilst they were thus occupied Violet drew near to Max and patted the horse's neck, and raised her eyes to his with a sort of wistful appeal. She had but a moment, for already Mrs. Whitworth, leaving her lord to finish the admonition, was turning back towards them.

'Must you really—really—go?' asked Violet, in a hasty, timid, pleading whisper.

'I must,' he answered quietly. 'Is it not as well that I should?'

'I—I am sorry,' she faltered.

He looked at her with a little momentary



perplexity, as if wondering why she should care. Was it some coquettish lure? Was Lord Kilvastone not enough for her? Women were coquettes; and had he not arrived at the conclusion that Violet was only like the rest? There was not time for another word to pass between them, for Mrs. Whitworth was beside them again; and in two minutes Max Randolph had mounted, and was riding out of the courtyard, looking back to lift his hat with a smiling good-bye.

That 'coming events cast their shadows before' is a psychic truth; but they cast no shadow visible to ordinary mortals, although here and there, 'with cleared eyes,' a seer interprets the signs. The invisible, impalpable world around us is throbbing with portents and teeming with foreshadowings; but *we*, flesh-bound in our narrow earth-cells, see not the shadows that would warn, the lights that



would guide us like beacons on our way—hear not the soundless waves of spirit-life that surge round our prison walls. We are deaf and blind to the fuller, higher, deeper life in which our poor bubble of earthly existence floats its little day, and breaks, and melts into that vaster world it has not known. Only now and then, through a loophole in the dungeon of the flesh, one pale ray of that other world's light steals in, and shows us the shadowy forms of the future looming through the darkness; and then we cry aloud and tell the wondrous tale of our presentiment to our probably unbelieving fellow-mortals who have never seen a sign.

Dimly, this day, a feeling of foreboding coldly overshadowed Violet's spirits. She could not shake it off; but no voice whispered to Max Randolph as he rode on his way to Altaville.

The horse's hoofs fell almost noiselessly in the deep, loose sand, which lay bleached and



burning like a strip of the desert. The almost overpowering sweetness of the orange-blossoms floated from the neighbouring groves, wherein the trees, covered with their scented snow of blossom, looked like huge bridal bouquets. A cloudless sky of dazzling azure arched overhead; a brazen sun poured its pitiless glare on grove and wood and lake, and on the fast-fading scarlet of the sorrel-field, and on the burnt white road. Max Randolph, born in a semi-tropical climate, and inured to outdoor life, accepted the heat and the dust and the glare, and rode on his way more tranquilly and philosophically than any of the transplanted Britons of West Grove House would have done.

He was nearing a small settlement, consisting of a few scattered wooden houses, which lay between West Grove and Altaville, when he caught the sound of a distant but rapidly



approaching commotion on a path that intersected his road almost at right angles—a hubbub of outcries and execrations it seemed to be. Trees intercepted his view of this path, so that for a minute he only heard the fast-nearing shouts; then suddenly a tall negro—panting, wild, his shirt half-torn from off his burly shoulders, his white teeth showing like a savage snarling animal’s—rushed across the road. Behind, in hot pursuit, ran three or four white men with shouts and deep execrations.

‘What’s up, boys?’ exclaimed Randolph, reining up his horse.

‘Murder. Stop him!’ was the answering shout.

‘He’s murdered young Kennedy — *stop him!*’

‘Young Kennedy!’ said Max, starting with an exclamation of horror. He knew Frank



Kennedy the blacksmith well, and liked him, and had stopped at the forge for many a chat during the past season. Kennedy! that fine young fellow—murdered!

No idea occurred to him but to follow and seize the murderer—he, the only mounted man there—probably the only one who could overtake the assassin, who ran like the wind, and was making for the woods, wherein they might find a difficulty in catching him.

Randolph turned his horse sharp round; at one cut of the whip the spirited creature gave a plunge, that would have unseated a less practised rider, and broke into a gallop, which, in a few moments, carried him not only up to but past the object of pursuit. Max pulled the horse up sharply, almost throwing him on his haunches, with the sudden turn of which he had learnt the knack in his wild Western life, flung himself from the saddle right across the negro's path, and seized him.



‘Hold off!’ the murderer cried, with a savage oath.

But Randolph had got his hands fast twisted in his torn collar, gripping his stalwart shoulder. The negro, panting hard, strove to wrench himself free, and, failing, thrust his hand into his breast. Max saw the movement and its meaning, and realising in a flash his error in not having mastered the right hand first, caught that wrist in a vice-like grip. The man twisted like a snake in his grasp, and as the two closed and locked in deadly struggle there was the sharp but smothered crack of a pistol.

Max felt no pain at the instant; but something seemed to have struck him a blow in the chest; he had a sensation as of an electric shock quivering like lightning through every nerve; and suddenly and strangely the power went out of his muscles, and the earth seemed to heave like the waves of the sea, as the sky and the trees swam round him.



It all took place in little more than a moment ; but the foremost of the pursuers, with a desperate dash to the front, came up with them in time to seize the murderer as he wrested himself from Randolph's failing grasp. The others speedily rushed to the spot and disarmed him. His revolver, indeed, was harmless now, as there had been but one chamber left loaded, and it was that last loaded chamber he had emptied in the struggle with Max. He struck at his assailants with the butt-end ; but they were too many and too strong for him, and mastered him, though he fought like a tiger. Two of them hastened to Max Randolph's assistance, as he had staggered back dizzily from the fray ; they caught him as he swayed and fell, laid him gently on the ground and knelt down by him to see what mischief was done.

Meanwhile, from every quarter others



came running in hot haste to the spot ; an excited crowd was collecting, as the news flew like wildfire ; and cries of ‘ Shoot him ! ’ ‘ Hang him ! ’ ‘ Lynch him ! ’ were raised as the throng thickened—no mixed crowd of men, women and children, but a ‘ frontier crowd ’ of bearded men !

‘ He’s taken red-handed ; he’s done one murder, if not *two* ! Let’s hang him up to this tree right here ! ’ shouted one man, pushing to the front, and there was a fierce and threatening murmur of acquiescence.

Then another man—a fine powerful-looking fellow, with a strong, shrewd, yet kindly face—strode forward, and called to them in a voice which, though it was the tone of a brother and comrade, claimed and commanded their attention.

‘ Stay, boys ! hold on ! Give the law a chance. Justice should be done in cool blood.



He's to be hanged—we'll see to *that*!' A grim mutter of assent was heard in many voices. 'But let him be hanged in due form by the officers of the law, whose proper work this is. Don't bring a blot on our city of Altaville and let those other fellows say we couldn't trust our own lawful authorities, elected by ourselves to do such business as this on our behalf. *This* isn't the backwoods! Let law, order, and justice be our watchwords here! And,' he added, with a stern and exultant ring in his deep and powerful voice, '*the gaol isn't built that'll hold him from us if we want to have him out!*'

A shout of applause went up. It was this last argument that clinched the matter. Besides, the lynch-law party were in the minority—although a noisy minority.

The prisoner was taken off in a cart, surrounded by half the crowd—some of them



forming themselves into a volunteer guard of the 'law and order' party, in doubt as to the possible intentions or impulses of the others—while the rest gathered round the spot where Max Randolph lay.



## CHAPTER XXXII.

## HEART TO HEART.

VIOLET was sitting in her room, with the company only of her own troubled thoughts ; she felt too sad, oppressed, and restless with miserable anxiety to care even to be with Rosemary. Rosemary was, no doubt, enjoying the cool shade of the trees or the piazza with Tregelva ; and Violet felt just now that she had no part nor lot in their happiness. She had said she was going to write letters, and had gone so far as to open her blotting-case ; but the pen was not yet dipped in the ink. She was in no mood for correspondence ; a feverish sense of coming trouble, a vague and unaccountable gloom,



mingled with almost unendurably bitter and self-reproachful thoughts of the past night.

She looked up with a start. What was that commotion below? Strange voices, heavy steps, the familiar voices raised in unfamiliar tones of horror, questioning dismay! That confusion of heavy trampling feet, as if they carried some cumbersome burthen!

In a moment those formless shadows of apprehension took shape; and she knew what she dreaded—felt that it was to Max Randolph that some mishap had befallen! She was sure of it as she sprang to the door and ran along the corridor—sure of it before Rosemary came hurrying to meet her, and caught her by both hands.

‘Keep cool, Vi; keep quiet!’ she said in an emphatic undertone. ‘There’s been an accident—to Max. Come back into your room—can’t you trust me?’



Violet stood still and pale as a statue. ‘Yes, when you tell me what it is—what has happened,’ she said in breathless but almost unnaturally self-contained and resolute tones.

‘It’s one of those tramps, those black brutes from Giralda—he had some row with young Kennedy the blacksmith and shot him; and Max went to seize him, and he turned on *him* and shot him too! But he may not be much hurt, Vi—we don’t know yet. Come, dear, we must not be in the way while they’re getting him to his room. Come, don’t lose your head, Vi!’ she added, looking anxiously at her friend’s white face, dilated eyes, and parted lips.

But there was little fear of Violet’s ‘losing her head’ in the face of a real catastrophe. She rose to that calmness of which the most highly sensitive and emotional women are capable at great crises. Stir the surface, and



their nervous excitability is easily ruffled ; strike down to the depths, and there lie the deep still forces of steadfast strength. So Rosemary found none of the difficulty she had feared in keeping Violet quietly with her whilst the wounded man was carefully carried to his room.

As soon as the confusion, and the tramping, and the words of command and questioning, and the opening and closing of doors was over, and they knew that he had been safely conveyed to his own room, they hastened to join the group in the corridor outside his door, where nearly all the household, as well as the men who had borne the extemporised litter to West Grove, were gathered together, talking in hushed excited tones. Violet, though pale as death, was one of the most collected and silent of the group ; but her eyes had a deep, almost stern, gaze of fixed and concentrated



purpose. When she turned to Staples, who was standing beside her, it seemed that those large steadfast eyes, with their unconscious intensity of expression, looked through and through him ; yet it was not on *him* that they were fixed : they were looking beyond him, to the purpose on which her heart was set. But she turned to him almost involuntarily, with that kind of instinct by which children and animals know where to turn for sympathy ; and when she noticed how genuinely shocked and sympathetic was his look, she drew closer to his side with a sort of clinging feeling of reliance. She felt she could trust, depend on *him*. *He* would tell her all the truth, so far as he knew it. And he did. He did not conceal from her that they all feared it was ‘a bad business,’ but the doctor had been sent for, and until he came none of them could tell how it would turn out.



Someone sensibly suggested that the less talking there was outside that door the better ; and a move downstairs was made, Rosemary and Tregelva walking away together, talking low, and only Violet lingered—lingered and watched a little distance from the door, until Mrs. Whitworth came out of the room. Then she went up to her hostess and took her hand, and looked in her face with those soft, steadfast, searching eyes.

‘How is he, dear?’ she asked anxiously, but quite calmly.

Mrs. Whitworth was looking grave.

‘Badly hurt, poor fellow, I’m afraid ; but we can’t tell till the doctor comes ; we must hope for the best.’

‘I may go in and see him, and sit with him, mayn’t I?’ said Violet, gently and quietly, but with that fixed purpose ready to assert itself if there should be any attempt to thwart it.



‘We are such old friends, you know; and I have always been considered a good little nurse. I’ve never yet been out of the way when anyone is ill or hurt.’

‘Well, I suppose you can go in if you wish it, dear child,’ said Mrs. Whitworth, only hesitating a very little. ‘But you mustn’t talk to him, or disturb him in any way; we must keep him as quiet as possible until the doctor can examine him.’

‘Oh, yes, certainly, I shall be very quiet,’ Violet promised softly; but the ease with which she gained Mrs. Whitworth’s consent sent an icy thrill of chill foreboding into her heart; she feared that ready yielding to her wish was ominous.

Mrs. Whitworth took her hand and led her into the room, where Mr. Whitworth stood by Max Randolph’s side.

He lay there motionless, lividly pale, and



with his eyes closed. But the first glance at his pale face was something of a relief to Violet ; she had expected to be more shocked—had dreaded finding some great and terrible change in him. She drew a chair gently to the bedside, and sat down with an air of tranquillity which Mr. and Mrs. Whitworth noticed ; and they thought—as she intended them to do—that a young woman who was quiet and helpful was less of a nuisance than an acquisition under such circumstances as these.

Violet sat silent, to all appearance quite collected and composed—not feeling much agitated, indeed ; her whole nervous system was too tensely wound up to self-control for her to be conscious of the strain. Her ruling feeling was the fixed determination that, whatever might happen, nothing *now* should come between herself and him. Her place was here by his side, and here she meant to stay ; her



heart was set on this, and she was not really conscious of feeling much more. Presently, while Mr. and Mrs. Whitworth were whispering apart, Max opened his eyes and looked round, with a half-dazed unrecognising glance at first.

‘Who is it?’ he asked.

‘It’s only I—Violet,’ she answered softly, even cheerfully, and laid her light cool fingers upon his. His hand closed round hers naturally, and held it fast. He breathed short, and set his teeth as if in some sharp pang.

‘Are you in much pain?’ she asked him tenderly.

‘No, not very much ; it comes and goes,’ he said, but his voice was weak and hollow. It seemed as strange as terrible to see him lying there so powerless and prostrate, when only that morning he had ridden forth so full of health and strength and vigour.

It seemed to Violet almost too strange to



be true ; she felt, somehow, as if this must be a dream.

The door opened softly, and Rosemary glided in. The sight of her seemed to wake Violet up with a shock ; it roused her to the consciousness of a quick stab of jealous pain.

She looked up at her with eyes that mutely pleaded, ‘ Oh, do not—do not—come between us *now* ! ’

Rosemary laid her hand on Violet’s shoulder with a tender, sympathising caress ; and the next time the wounded man opened his eyes they fell on those two pale fair faces bending over him together.

‘ I—am—not much to boast of now, am I ? ’ he said faintly, with a ghost of his old smile.

‘ But you’ll be more to boast of soon, we hope,’ said Rosemary very kindly and gently ‘ Now, you mustn’t try to talk ! ’



He did not try ; he seemed too weak to utter more than a few words at a time ; and very soon the doctor came, and the two girls left the room.

It seemed to Violet that a year of her life, a year of awful suspense, passed in that hour during which they waited for the doctor's report. It was Mrs. Whitworth who brought it to them at last. Her genial face was pale, and tears stood in her kindly eyes. Her look, even before she spoke, told them what she had come to tell.

‘I am afraid it's a bad case, girls. I didn't think he was so bad, poor fellow ! he took it so quietly. But the doctor looks very grave about it.’

‘What does the doctor say ?’ asked Rosemary.

‘He says—there, you may as well know



the truth !—he is afraid there's no chance. He thinks it can only be a question of a day or two at most—probably only of a few hours.'

Mrs. Whitworth could only stay with them a few minutes, so many urgent matters naturally claimed the attention of the mistress of the house at this crisis.

When she had gone, the two girls looked at each other, silently. Then Violet took Rosemary's hands, and gazed into her face with a breathless agony of mute entreaty. She could not utter the words ; but her eyes were dilated and intense with a prayer so passionate, so piteous, they pleaded more eloquently than her lips could ever have done. Their pleading pierced straight to the one soft spot in Rosemary's heart ; she made one more sacrifice to friendship. It *was* a sacrifice ; and she drew her breath hard for a minute before she said, ' Yes, Vi, you shall have him



to yourself. I won't come between you now.'

The tears rushed to Violet's eyes; all her compelled composure broke up suddenly, and her features quivered as if a very storm of weeping was imminent.

'Come, don't cry, Vi dear; don't break down *now*!' said Rosemary encouragingly.

'No, no,' she answered, mastering her agitation with a desperate effort. 'I won't—I *mustn't* break down *now*! There'll be time for that—afterwards.'

'Yes, only keep up, darling, and you shall be with him as much as you like. I'll see to that. I am coming in with you now to see him, poor fellow! Then I'll leave him to you.'

They went into the room together. Mr. Whitworth was there, with a pale, awe-stricken face. This was so terrible a thing to have come into their peaceful, Arcadian life!



Violet held back and allowed Rosemary to be the first at the bedside—the first to bend over him and speak. For Rosemary had been generous to *her*, and she would not fail in return.

He looked much worse than he had looked an hour before; in that short time his face seemed drawn and sunken, the temples hollowed, a contraction as if of pain about the pallid lips. Rosemary spoke to him in cheering and gentle tones of inquiry and sympathy; he answered her with a few words and a faint smile. Then she sat down beside him for a little while; and to Violet, sitting a little distance off, counting the time by the throbs of her loving, jealous, passionate heart, that little while seemed an age. Yet she asked herself as she sat watching, did he *want* Rosemary? If he wanted her, if he would rather have *her* by him than any other, then Violet



would yield her place, and Rosemary should watch by his side.

But he lay quietly, not seeming to want one person more than another, nor to care much who was by his side ; and soon—although it seemed late, late indeed, to Violet—Rosemary got up to go. But before she left him she stood for a moment by his side, with a regretful lingering look, and her hand clasped in his ; then she bent over him and pressed one pure, tender kiss upon his brow. His pale face brightened with a smile as he murmured gratefully, ‘ Thank you, dear ! ’

Then Rosemary went ; and soon Mr. Whitworth also began to get restless.

‘ Well, Violet, my dear, are you going to sit here a little while ? ’ he said.

‘ Yes,’ she replied, drawing her chair into a comfortable position, and settling herself with as matter-of-fact an air as possible.



‘Well, then, I’ll leave you in charge,’ he said, ‘while I go and look after things downstairs. You’ll just give us a call if he wants anything. There’s the ice and the lemonade.’

And Mr. Whitworth departed, thinking what a comfort it was to have no hysterical misses, but sensible, level-headed young women to deal with in such circumstances as these. And the sensible, level-headed young woman, as he left her, heaved a great deep sigh—deep as if her heart would burst, but silently, lest it should disturb the patient, as he seemed to be dozing.

She sat still, motionless, her eyes fixed upon his pale, changed face. He was going to die—to die! and die no natural death; his life cut short by violence in its prime; and she sat watching by his side as the vital forces ebbed slowly, slowly, away; and yet it all seemed to her like nothing more than a painful dream!



She felt wrapt in all the strange calmness of a dream. She told herself the terrible truth, framed it in words to her own heart, that Max lay dying ; and yet she felt, now that she was alone with him, now that there was none to come between them, no storm of grief, no passion of pain ; only that strange, cold, trance-like apathy, as if the heart were dead within her. If he must die, it seemed to her that her own heart had died first. No tears came to her eyes now ; she wondered at her own coldness—thought surely this *must* be all a dream, and she must soon awake !

Now and then he stirred, looked at her for a moment, and then his heavy eyes closed again. Once his hand moved slightly, as if seeking something. She laid her own on it, and his fingers closed round hers contentedly, if only half-consciously.

Once Mrs. Whitworth came in, bringing



refreshments and medicine, and, seeing that the patient was sleeping, laid her finger on her lips and went out again.

Presently he awoke; and Violet, obeying the instructions that had been left with her, gave him a few spoonfuls of lemonade and brandy, not allowing him to raise his head, and tenderly re-arranged the pillows. He seemed a little stronger after this, and inclined to talk.

‘You’ve been here—all the time?’ he said.

‘Yes.’

‘You are kind, gentle, good!’ he answered gratefully. ‘And yet,’ he added, with a shadow of his half sad, half bitter smile, ‘you didn’t care for me—you pitched me over like an old glove—when——’

He did not finish his sentence; but Violet, guided by Rosemary’s hint on the previous



night, rightly interpreted his meaning now—now, when it was all too late! And now that dead feeling of cold and dreamlike calm broke up in a rush of passionate anguish and despair, which it cost her all her strength and will-power to control—for it was no time for agitating explanations and protestations *now*! Yet one thing she felt she *must* say to him, and this might well be her last, last chance of saying it!

‘It was a mistake—all a foolish mistake of mine,’ she said, striving desperately for calmness of tone. ‘I—I *did* care—I did—I *do*!’

‘You care—for me, Violet?’ he murmured, raising his eyes to her face with something of the old seeking, searching look. ‘Stay with me, then,’ and he drew her hand into his. ‘Stay with me—I don’t think you’ll have so very long to stay.’

She shuddered and quivered, as the feeling



that his words were true seemed to stab her through the heart.

‘If it hadn’t been for me,’ she murmured, white and trembling with remorseful anguish, ‘perhaps you—you wouldn’t have ridden out to Altaville to-day!’ She was struggling hard to control herself, but, in spite of her effort, her voice quivered pitifully.

‘No, no, dear; don’t think that!’ he replied eagerly. ‘I was going anyhow. It was nothing, nothing, child, to do with *you*—that *you* could help. Can a man escape his fate?’

He spoke so like himself—his voice, in the moment’s earnestness, regained so much of its natural tone—that a thrill of hope, keen as a dart of fear, ran through her.

‘You are *not* so much hurt?’ she said tremblingly; ‘you will—you *will* get over this?’



‘No,’ he said, quietly and firmly; ‘I shan’t get over it, Violet. I know, and the doctor knows. It’s *here*’—he put his hand to his breast—‘and it will be the end of me—before very long, I think. Don’t be too sorry for me, Violet; it must come to us all.’

‘Yes—in old age,’ she answered painfully and brokenly. ‘But *you—now—*’

‘Does it matter much,’ he rejoined, ‘whether it’s soon or late? Death’s as natural as life—our inevitable end. Life hasn’t been over-kind to me—I have not much reason to trouble at leaving it. We must all go through the gates. And beyond the gates—there’s *something*—but “who is he that knows?”’

His voice was growing faint and hollow as he murmured the last words.

‘It tires you to speak; we must not talk,’ she said anxiously.

He seemed fatigued by the efforts of speak-



ing ; his breath came short, and he sank back into a doze, holding her hand fast. And the hours dragged by ; and Violet sat immovably by the bedside ; and people came and went softly, and their movements did not seem to disturb him, as he lay quiet, with closed eyes.

The Whitworths came every now and then ; and Staples looked in with a very long face ; and Tregelva came and stood in the doorway with an air of sympathy ; and presently Rosemary came in with her aunt, and Mrs. Whitworth insisted on relieving guard.

‘ You must go now and have some dinner, my dear,’ she said to Violet, with a quiet firmness that admitted of no dispute. ‘ You will be getting tired and faint if you don’t. You can come back, but you must go with Rosemary now, like a good girl ; Pinkie has got you some dinner.’

They might have spared their trouble, for



all that Violet could eat ; but Rosemary took her out in the fresh air, and was very gentle and sympathetic, and allowed, and, indeed encouraged, Violet to find relief in tears, without endeavouring to drive them back to their sources, and thereby deprive a sorrow of its natural vent, as some well-meaning people do, and are proud of their own ‘ good management ’ of the mourner when they have succeeded in shutting the safety-valve and sat down upon it.



## CHAPTER XXXIII.

## SOUL TO SOUL.

ROSEMARY had common-sense and sympathy enough to know that Violet would be all the better for the natural relief of a few tears. She let her cry just as much as she thought good for her, and then used all her influence—and her stronger nature had a great influence over Violet's more gentle, yielding, and sensitive one—to soothe and restore her to calmness; and her efforts were successful—so successful that she soon ventured to allow Violet to perceive that there was something to be told—something that Rosemary half-hesitated yet wished to tell her.



‘What is it?’ Violet asked, with a startled apprehensive look. ‘Surely there can be nothing *worse*?’

‘Oh, no,’ Rosemary said reassuringly; ‘it’s only a little curious—something that, though it’s in a way mysterious, might help to make some dark things clear! Do you recollect, Vi, how that foolish Jemmy Dexter insisted on tattooing my initials on his arm?’ she added significantly.

‘Yes,’ said Violet, looking up with sudden interest. ‘Then has he—Max——?’

‘Yes,’ Rosemary answered the unspoken question. ‘A woman’s name—not mine, my dear, nor yours—tattooed quite clearly just over his heart. Who would have thought Max had so much sentiment about him? It’s an old tattoo-mark, Aunt Em says—evidently years old, but quite clear.’

‘What name?’ Violet asked in a low voice,



with her eyes averted. Rosemary instinctively lowered her own voice also, in reply, as if *he*, lying in his room upstairs—the room that he should never leave till he was carried out—could have heard her utter the name he had held sacred, hidden at his heart for years and years—the name of ‘Laura.’

‘I think this throws a ray of light on many things, Vi,’ Rosemary added.

‘Yes,’ replied Violet faintly, ‘it does indeed.’

An hour afterwards, she was installed again in her place by the invalid’s bedside.

‘Violet’s a born nurse, and loves doing Florence Nightingale and ministering-angel business,’ Rosemary observed on the piazza; and the observation was meant for Lord Kilvastone’s benefit.

Violet, as she sat beside the bedside now,



keeping her faithful watch, felt her heart melted within her in a great unutterable anguish of tenderness and yearning. She felt that her knowledge of that name, which must be branded deep within, as well as lettered above, his heart, if in one way it set him further off from her—far, far away, isolated in the secret of his own past—in another aspect, brought him nearer to her. The feeling that she had even so faint a glimpse into his inner life—so frail and slight a clue to his secret—seemed to her to draw them closer together.

He *could* love, then—*had* loved—even if he did not love *her*! Did he love Rosemary? In this new light the answer came to her ‘No.’ The mystery of this hidden name—shrouded, impenetrable, inviolable in itself—yet threw a ray of light, as Rosemary had said, that made some dark things clear. Clearly, indeed, now



Violet could see what his feeling towards them both might well have been—a fleeting gust of passion for Rosemary—a purer tenderness for *her*; but for neither of them that love which she believed now that he had felt, but which she had sometimes deemed him incapable of feeling.

Underneath all his professed disdain of love and disbelief in it, there had lain treasured a secret and a memory. Deep beneath his scorn and scepticism, he had held one name, one image, shrined sacred and apart.

She knew many of Max Randolph's friends—some who had been intimate with him for many years; she remembered well that occasionally they had indulged in a game of speculation on the subject of Max and his possible loves, and had generally arrived at the conclusion that he was not a man for falling in love.



She could not recall ever having heard a word or a hint that even suggested any suspicion of a love-story in his life.

Who was she then, this unknown 'Laura,' whose name had never by any friend been heard to pass his lips, though all the while it was written on his heart? Was she living or dead? did she know where he was? and—this thought flashed suddenly into Violet's mind—if she were living, *ought* she not to be made aware of his condition now?

While Violet was thinking thus he opened his eyes, and they turned slowly upon her face, and fixed there with a strange, clear, calm, untroubled gaze: already they seemed to have looked into another world—to have caught the reflection of a serenity not of earth.

'Violet,' he murmured presently, 'sweet and good! You are still there?'

She leant a little nearer to him, and pressed



his cold damp hand as she asked him tenderly the question then.

‘Is there anyone you would like me to write to? or to—to send for?’

‘No,’ he replied without a second’s hesitation, ‘no one!’

Whoever the unknown Laura might be, if she still lived, they were parted by so wide a gulf that even in death he would not reach a hand across it.

As evening closed in he grew more restless and feverish, sometimes falling into an uneasy sleep, then waking in spasms of pain that took his breath.

Later on he began to wander a little—talked of things and places of which Violet knew nothing, and mingled these with allusions to this day’s events.

‘There’s poor young Kennedy gone on



before,' he muttered—'so many gone on before. The gates are open—I can't see them—but—I shall know—I shall know——' He turned his head, and looked fixedly into a corner of the room.

'There's a dog!' he said. 'It came in at the window.'

He lay quite still for a few moments, and then said suddenly, softly, groping with his hand upon the counterpane—

'*Laura*, are you there?'

'I am here,' faltered Violet.

He pointed to the corner where his delirious fancy had conjured up the dog.

'Is that your dog, *Laura*? ' he asked. 'It's not old "Spot!"—"Spot" bit me'—he smiled a curious, changed smile as he showed an old scar upon his hand—'but I forgave him because he was your dog. Let us go for a walk in the wood!' Then, as he turned on the



pillow, the movement seemed to pain him, and he added with a gasping sigh, 'No, no—I can't go: they've pinned me down with an iron spike through *here*'—he laid his hand on his breast—'I'm pinned *here*—I cannot move;—but you—you will stay with me?'

'Yes, dear,' said Violet softly, tenderly, 'I will stay!'

Strangely enough, she felt no jealousy of this unknown Laura—the woman who was present now to his spirit's senses, although it was Violet's soft living hand that was clasped in his. Jealousy had leapt in her heart like a devouring flame at the moment when Rosemary's words on that unforgotten moonlight night had brought before her the picture of Max as Rosemary's lover. But no thought of jealousy came near her now. She seemed to have gone so far with him towards the other world—she had left such earth-born passions behind.



Rather, there was a strange, solemn, bitter-sweetness in the thought that in his delirious fancy he identified *her* with the woman he had loved best. It was as if his soul, wandering free, passing, as though already disembodied, beyond the gates of the senses, turned in recognition to *hers*, felt the subtle magnetism in *hers* of the same ‘love strong as death,’ which ‘many waters cannot quench,’ which must have thrilled and filled the soul of his lost love. Happy Laura ! thought Violet—happy, whether living or dead ; happy, however tragic might have been the story of their love and parting—the story which Violet would never know ; happy, that in these last hours his mind’s eye saw her face—that in soul he called her to his side, and rested at peace in the consciousness of her presence now !

Nay, was it only a delirious dream that she was with him ? May there not be a truth under-



lying the superstition that the dying—with their feet on the bridge that leads from world to world—see ‘with cleared eyes?’ and might not in this hour some mysterious consciousness flash along the unseen currents of spirit-life and reach to Laura, wherever she might be—whether she were still a soul in fleshly fetters, or had already passed the gates, through darkness to the light?

The evening passed without any marked change in the patient’s condition. Mr. Whitworth and Staples, who was both kind and capable in cases of illness, shared the night-watch, under promise of calling Mrs. Whitworth and Violet should any serious change take place. All night Max lay restless and suffering, his breathing growing more laboured, his pulse fainter and quicker. When day was dawning the pain seemed to cease, and he sank into unconsciousness. He had always



hated giving trouble to people, and he did not give much now. The end made no long delay.

About noon, when Violet was by his side—not alone, for others shared her watch, now that the end evidently was so near—he slowly opened his eyes wide ; but they looked recognisingly on no one, nothing there : their large, clear gaze was fixed on no earthly vision—fixed far away, as if beholding what none else could see. There was consciousness, but not consciousness of the things of earth, the watchers by his side, in that look of almost unearthly calm. No sign of suffering marred its peace, although the laboured breathing was failing fast ; the intervals between each deep and gasping breath grew longer and longer. He strove to lift himself up ; and Violet, who was nearest to him, raised and rested his head upon her shoulder. The faint wonderful smile



of the dying stole over his pallid, sunken face. His lips moved. He had not spoken for hours ; but now he murmured, in a voice that seemed like a hollow echo from far, far off, the name that none there but Violet had heard from his lips until that last moment—

‘Laura ! Laura !’

Then, one quick convulsive sigh—and Max Randolph had done with life on this planet.



## CHAPTER XXXIV.

## LAND IN SIGHT !

‘MISS PRESTON’S looking very pale,’ said Lord Kilvastone with an air of concern.

‘She is,’ agreed Rosemary, to whom he had addressed his remark, who was, indeed, the only person present. They two chanced to be sitting alone on the piazza ; it was the evening of the day that Max Randolph had been laid in the little churchyard, where there were but few graves as yet ; and the next day the northward-bound party were to leave West Grove House.

‘She will be better when we get out of this place—this climate,’ Rosemary continued.



‘ You—you don’t think she’s—ill ? ’ he suggested doubtfully.

‘ Ill ? No : she’s tired ; and of course—Violet is very sensitive, you know—she has been a good deal upset by this sad affair.’

‘ She’s very tender-hearted, isn’t she ? ’ he observed.

‘ Very,’ said Rosemary.

‘ Yes,’ he continued ; ‘ she reminds me of a kind of a—Madonna—those pictures with a halo, don’t you know ? Sometimes she has a look on her face more like an angel than a woman.’

Rosemary opened her eyes a little wider, while a faint smile twitched the corners of her lips. She certainly never would have thought of likening Vi to either an angel or a Madonna. Vi was a dear, sweet girl, and she loved her ; but an angel ! The young Earl was evidently very, very far gone !



‘ You appreciate Violet’s charms very highly, don’t you?’ she said demurely.

‘ Well, I suppose I do. But I don’t think I think any more of her than she deserves.’

Rosemary smiled again at the *naïveté* and clumsiness of the expression.

‘ And I presume you have made Violet aware of your kind appreciation?’

‘ I suppose she knows it; girls generally know these things, don’t they? Miss Heath,’ he added, after a moment’s hesitation, ‘ you—I fancy you see how the land lies——’

‘ With you? Well, not being blind, I have perceived it.’

He looked at her askance—something as a dog looks at a cat whom he suspects of treacherous intentions, from whose velvet paws he momentarily expects a scratched face.

‘ You need not look at me suspiciously,’ she said, mildly amused. ‘ I am not an enemy.



I bear no malice against you for not falling in love with *me*,' she added with her light, audacious laugh.

This embarrassed Lord Kilvastone; he looked awkward, and positively almost blushed.

'Well, you know, Miss Heath, a fellow can't—can't fall in love with two girls at once,' he said apologetically.

'No?' she queried with gentle mockery.

'And you couldn't have married two of us,' he continued.

'No: that would have been beyond even me.'

Archibald St. Julian had a wholesome awe of drifting either into a flirtation or a collision with Rosemary; and with the directness of purpose with which he habitually pursued his way, he declined to be turned from the train of thought and speech on which he had started.



‘But, about—Miss Preston—Violet?’ he said.

‘Yes, returning to our *moutons*—about Violet now. Do you want a word of advice from me?’

‘Well, I—I’d like to ask you, do you think I’ve a chance with her? or—or was there something up—something between her and that poor fellow?’

‘They were old friends, you know,’ replied Rosemary easily, ‘and Violet was certainly very fond of him; why, she had known him ever so many years, and of course it was only natural that his death in that terribly sudden and tragic way should upset her a good deal. But that’s all over now, and as to your chance with her, why, you have the best of chances! Are we not all going north, to England? We shall all meet in New York, if you wait there for us—that is, when we



come up from Pine Ridge. Do you think you *will* be there when we arrive?' She looked at him with a certain keenness of questioning; for his willingness to accommodate his movements to theirs would be a test of his being 'in earnest' about Violet.

'Yes, certainly,' he said; 'but you won't be many days behind me, will you?'

'Not many, you may be sure, if *I* have an oar in the boat. Of course I must stay a few days at Pine Ridge; and Mr. Tregelva,' she continued in a modest and maidenly tone, 'must be duly introduced to my people, and make acquaintance with them; but we shall make our way north as soon as ever it's possible for me to get away. And then we might all cross the Atlantic together,' she suggested.

'Of course,' he agreed promptly. 'We'll do that.'



‘Then, I am sure it is plain sailing enough for you,’ she replied. ‘Vi will be glad to see you in New York; and there will be the voyage—the best of opportunities for making oneself agreeable. Why, you’ll have the game all in your own hands!’

He smiled as this encouraging prospect was unrolled before him.

‘We’re all off to-morrow morning,’ he observed thoughtfully. Then you would not advise me to—to speak to her to-night?’

‘No, not to-night. She’s tired and nervous. Meet us in New York; sail on the same steamer with us—that is your best plan. You’ll have your opportunity on the voyage: trust me!’

And Lord Kilvastone took Rosemary’s advice, and did trust her—for the first time.

He did not hurry himself over his journey to New York, taking it in easy stages, and



visiting various cities *en route*, so that he only reached there a day or two before Violet and Rosemary, under the escort of the latter's *fiancé*, arrived from Pine Ridge. He made acquaintance with Violet's grandfather, aunt, uncle, and cousins, all of whom were highly prepossessed in his favour. As Rosemary remarked, Lord Kilvastone was a wonderful improvement on Staples; he seemed to have left many of his uncouth, bearish ways behind in Florida.

He and Tregelva sailed on the same steamer with the Preston family, with whom Rosemary travelled; and as there are no better opportunities in the world than those afforded by a sea voyage for manifestations of devotion, and as Lord Kilvastone was in no way backward in availing himself of these opportunities, and Violet received his attentions amiably, it was supposed by many of their



fellow-travellers that there were two happy couples in the Preston party.

The giant steamer 'City of Rome,' like a floating city, glides lightly as a sea-bird over a summer ocean smooth as a lake. The flush of sunset still glows in the west; the blending azure and sapphire of sea and sky are deepening as the first shadowy softness of the on-coming night steals over them.

It is the last evening on the Atlantic; ere morning the great ship will anchor off the Irish coast. Already along the horizon a purplish line lies like a cloud—the first glimpse of land. All the voyagers—a goodly list of some four hundred 'saloon passengers'—are on deck; for the most part they are promenading in pairs, or leaning over the bulwarks gazing at that purple line of the distant land, also in pairs. One pair, Lord Kilvastene and Miss Preston, are up at the



bow of the vessel, where passengers are not allowed, where windlasses, blocks, and coils of rope are set as snares for their feet, and a barrier stretched across to keep them back. But Lord Kilvastone has a habit of getting his own way—on board the ‘City of Rome’ as elsewhere ; and as the barrier here is only a slack-rope, he and Violet have calmly stepped over it, and here they are side by side, leaning over the bulwarks, watching the keen edge of the giant bow, which towers up like the wall of a house, cut smooth and swift through the blue depths beneath.

He has drawn her hand through his arm to pilot her past the obstacles which beset the intruding passenger’s path up to this forbidden quarter, where no one has followed them ; and as they lean and look down on the water so far below, they are close together ; the breeze beats the ribbons of Violet’s hood, and a loose



tress of her hair, against his shoulder. He clasps and presses the little hand that rests so confidently upon his sleeve. Her other hand lies on the bulwark, slim, and bare, and white. It looks tempting; he does not see why he should not hold that one too: besides, the poor little hand looks pale and cold and lonely away from its mate! He draws it into his clasp—presses both the little cold hands together; and Violet leaves them unresistingly in his.

During the voyage she has learnt to lean upon his tender and unfailing care, to turn to him for every little help. Now that the ocean is so nearly crossed, and land already in sight, and parting—if they *are* to part—so near, she feels how much she would miss that ever-ready, kind, and faithful hand if it were withdrawn. Always very susceptible to external influences, she is keenly alive to the soft



surroundings of the scene,—the fading sunset ; the subtle and tender hues of sea and sky as the slowly deepening twilight falls over them like a veil ; the suggestions of the dim blue line of land on the horizon, the tranquil ocean, its vast bosom heaving gently as a child's asleep ; the huge vessel, a world in itself, cutting its way clean as a knife straight through the waveless waters—homeward bound !

All impulses of soul and sense

combine to thrill Lord Kilvastone's ' guileless Genevieve ' this night ; and he, quick to feel, if slow to express, feels that his hour has come to speak.

He has no need to tell her that he loves her : he is sure she must know that well. ' On such a night as this ' few words are needed to tell the old, old story. He begins by requesting her to call him ' Archie,' as his ' own people '



do ; and then avails himself of this promising opening by hurrying on to ask if she will accept the right to address him in such familiar and homelike terms for the remainder of their natural lives?

I need not add that he stumbles through this important inquiry in blunt and broken phrase.

If it is an open question whether Violet is the least in love with Lord Kilvastone, there is no question whatever that she is very fond of him—that she gets on thoroughly well with him, is content in his companionship, and can contemplate without even ‘a little aversion’ the prospect of that companionship being a life-long union. Of course she hesitates a little, in woman’s way, before committing herself to a decisive answer ; but Archie is bent on having a clear ‘yes’ or ‘no’ from her ; and Violet, having, to her everlasting and bitter regret,



uttered the fatal little two-lettered monosyllable once too often already, will not make the same mistake again !

They make their way back from the bow, over the stumbling-blocks of windlasses and coils of rope, an affianced couple—Archie humming an air under his breath, and rather out of tune, in the exuberance of his gladness ; Violet with a soft flutter of not unhappy excitement, making her heart beat quick. They have lingered longer than they are aware in their solitude at the end of the vessel ; the sunset has faded and night has fallen when they return to the still crowded promenade deck.

Many of the passengers have been attracted down to the music-room by the usual impromptu concert which goes on every night when it is calm enough. As they pass by the open doors of the companionway, the refrain of the ‘ Habañera ’ song from ‘ Carmen ’ floats up



to them in Rosemary's clear, full, ringing voice.

'Si tu ne m'aimes pas, je t'aime.

Si je t'aime, prends garde à toi !'

Violet pauses with a start, and a little shiver runs like a chill to her heart ; but it is a good sign that as that reminder of the past stabs through the hope and joy of the present, unconsciously, instinctively, she clings closer to her future husband's arm.

That song brings back to her in one flash of memory the picture of the parlour at West Grove House, and Max Randolph standing by the piano. Like the distant tolling of a knell, echoing across scented summer flowering fields, that refrain strikes on her ear.

She has cast the die of her future this night ; and it is a fortunate cast. Life smiles upon her in radiant promise. Yet, as at this hour, on the threshold of her fair future, that song



comes to her as an echo from a tragic past—so it will be for ever. Through the gay, bright melody of her life will run one recurrent note that to *her* sounds like a requiem. The tune to which her days are set now *may*—nay, surely *will*—be joyous; but through the dominant harmony ever and again *her* ear will catch that one ‘pathetic minor’ chord of memory thrilling. A word, a snatch of the old songs, the scent of the Southern yellow jasmine or magnolia—and she will be back again at the West Grove, wandering through the pine-woods, dreaming amongst the orange-trees, or drifting on the lakes, with Max Randolph by her side!

There is no fear that the fair young Countess of Kilvastone will not be happy, popular, prosperous, beautiful, beloved—and loving too, for the tendrils of her vine-like nature will soon learn to twine fast and firm around her Archie’s stolid strength and sturdy faith. But



she will never forget the man who won her love unsought, who lies in his lonely grave in the little South Florida churchyard, his heart's secret buried with him—the secret she will never know!

THE END.

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